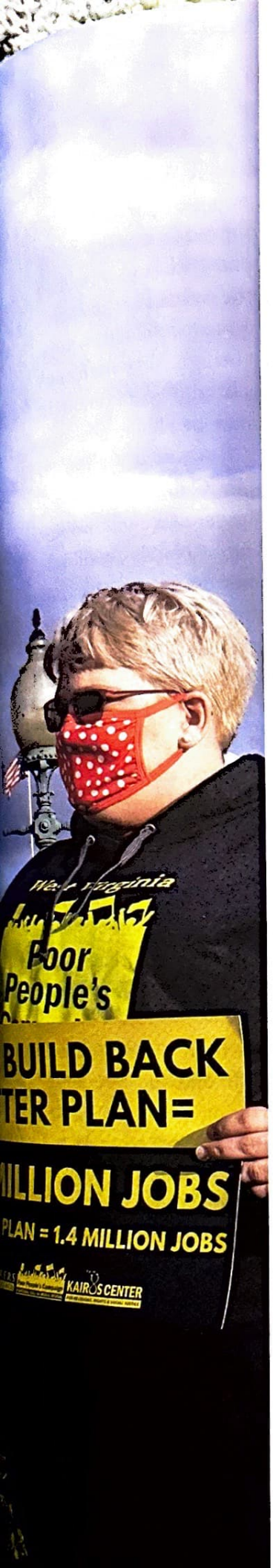


CHAPTER 15

Religion

Learning Objectives

- Define religion from an anthropological perspective.
- Compare different theoretical approaches to the anthropological study of religion.
- Analyze the role of religion in meaning making and mobilizing power.
- Explain how globalization is changing religion.

> "We gather on these streets in the spirit of the prophet Amos who declared: Hate evil, love good, and establish justice in the public square."
>
> —Interfaith leaders, Poor People's Campaign March on Washington, D.C.

On the morning of Saturday, June 18, 2022, religious leaders from twenty faith groups joined to deliver a litany in front of the U.S. Capitol to begin a day-long rally against poverty organized by the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival (PPC). People of faith joined tens of thousands of union workers, community organizers, students, scholars, gun safety advocates, and activists for voting rights, immigration reform, abortion rights, climate action, and LGBTQ rights. They marched, sang, spoke, and prayed. They heard testimonials from poor and low-wage Americans.

They called on Congress and the president to address long-term poverty in the United States. PPC co-chair and charismatic leader Reverend William Barber II, dressed in black clergy robes adorned with a large cross, exhorted the crowd like a revival preacher, "This level of poverty and greed in this the richest nation in the history of the world constitutes a moral crisis and a fundamental failure of the policies of greed." In soaring tones, he warned of the apocalyptic state of the nation and its government: "The regressive policies which produce 140 million poor and low-wealth people are not benign. They are forms of 'policy murder'." Poverty is not inevitable, Barber declared. There is enough for everyone. Instead, poverty is a public policy that must be challenged and changed.

Barber, pastor of Greenleaf Christian Church in Goldsboro, North Carolina, came to national prominence in 2013 as the leader of a civil disobedience campaign called Moral Mondays. Then president of North Carolina's state chapter of the NAACP, Barber convened protestors every Monday in the state capital, Raleigh, to fight against increasingly conservative policies restricting voting rights and decreasing support for health and education. Every Monday, demonstrators from across North Carolina gathered to engage in conversation and civil disobedience. Attendance ranged from 2,500 to 10,000 each week that the state legislature was in session. Many would enter the state legislature building to speak with lawmakers, and some were peacefully arrested. Over the course of the 2013 protests, for instance, 900 were arrested—including Barber, who, despite struggling with a lifelong spinal ailment, was arrested on so many occasions that he was eventually banned from the building. As Barber explained at one Moral Monday gathering, "(W)e have no other choice but to assemble in the people's house where these bills are being presented, argued, and voted upon in the hopes that God will move in the hearts of our legislators as he moved in the heart of Pharoah to let His people go."

Today's Poor People's Campaign draws inspiration from the 1968 Poor People's Campaign designed by Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. They planned to bring poor people to Washington, D.C., that June to make hunger and poverty visible to those in power and to demand an economic bill of rights for the nation's poor. Civil rights leaders, many of whom were motivated by their religious faith, had come to believe that the civil rights movement's gains in expanding voting rights and ending legal segregation had not improved material conditions for many Black Americans. They worried that the multiracial effort to alleviate poverty, including President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty, launched in 1964, had lost momentum as the U.S. government turned its attention to fighting a war in

Vietnam. King himself had turned his rhetorical and organizing skills to fighting poverty and militarism, most notably in his speech against the Vietnam War in New York's Riverside Church on April 4, 1967. Exactly one year later, King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, where he had traveled to support striking sanitation workers leading up to the Poor People's Campaign.

For some, the efforts of Barber and the Poor People's Campaign to engage with public policy and political activism—like King's efforts a generation ago—may seem like work unfit for spiritual leaders. But for these leaders and their congregations, the integration of theology, social analysis, and action in addressing the pressing issues facing humanity only continues a long tradition of engagement with matters important to the church's followers and to the world.

Religion plays a central role in human life and culture. Through the study of religion, anthropologists engage some of the deepest, most difficult, and most enduring human questions—about meaning, difference, power, love, sexuality, mortality, morality, human origins, and kinship. Religion has been a central interest of anthropologists since the beginning of our field (Frazer 1890; Tylor 1871). Research about religious beliefs and practices worldwide has explored an amazing diversity of beliefs, symbols, rituals, myths, institutions, religious experts, groups, deities, and supernatural forces. As you read about diverse religions in this chapter, some beliefs and practices may seem quite familiar. Others may be surprising or unexpected. Many might stretch your basic assumptions of what religion is and does.

In this chapter, we consider the anthropological approach to understanding the many groups, beliefs, and practices that are called "religion." In particular, we examine the following questions:

- What is religion?
- What tools do anthropologists use to understand how religion works?
- In what ways is religion both a system of meaning and a system of power?
- How is globalization changing religion?

By the end of the chapter, you will be able to investigate and analyze religion using the tools of an anthropologist. You will be better able to understand religion in your own life, in the growing religious pluralism of the United States, and in diverse religious expressions around the world. These skills will be increasingly valuable tools for living and working in the twenty-first century.

What Is Religion?

» Define religion from an anthropological perspective.

When anthropologists talk about religion, what are we really talking about? Since the beginning of the discipline, anthropologists have attempted to create a universal definition that might apply to all religions' local manifestations. But the vast global diversity of these expressions makes defining religion a difficult task. Is there something present in all cultures that we can call "religion"?

Seeking a Working Definition

The unique anthropological approach to religion begins with the everyday religious practices of people in their local communities. Through fieldwork, anthropologists focus on the real religious worlds in which humans experience religion physically and express it through their actions. We may study a religion's history, theology, scriptures, and major figures, but we do so to understand their meaning and significance in the life of a community of people. Religion is not theoretical in people's daily activities. People make sense of the world, reach decisions, and organize their lives on the basis of their religious beliefs. Starting from these beginning principles, anthropologists also explore the myriad ways religion intersects with other systems of power, whether economics, politics, race, gender, or sexuality. And we explore how local religious expressions may be connected to larger religious movements or institutions.

Anthropologists have compiled a vast and diverse set of data on religious beliefs and practices worldwide. In general, we find that all local expressions of religion combine some, but not necessarily all, of the following elements:

- Belief in powers or deities whose abilities transcend those of the natural world and cannot be measured by scientific tools
- Myths and stories that reflect on the meaning and purpose of life, its origins, and humans' place in the universe
- Ritual activities that reinforce, recall, instill, and explore collective beliefs
- Powerful symbols, often used in religious rituals, that represent key aspects of the religion for its followers
- Specialists who help the average believer bridge everyday life experiences and the religion's ideals and supernatural aspects
- Organizations and institutions that preserve, explore, teach, and implement the religion's key beliefs
- A community of believers

What is religion? At the 600-year-old Prasanna Ganapathi Temple in Bangalore, India, a Hindu priest performs ritual blessings of new cars, auto rickshaws, and motorbikes to bestow divine protections on car and owner.

As a working definition, we might then say that a **religion** is a set of beliefs and rituals based on a vision of how the world ought to be and how life ought to be lived, often, though not always, focused on a supernatural power and lived out in community. (For an overview of the distribution of adherents to major world religions today, see Figure 15.1. Considering the range of religions shown there, perhaps you can begin to imagine the challenge inherent in creating a working definition to cover such a broad spectrum.)

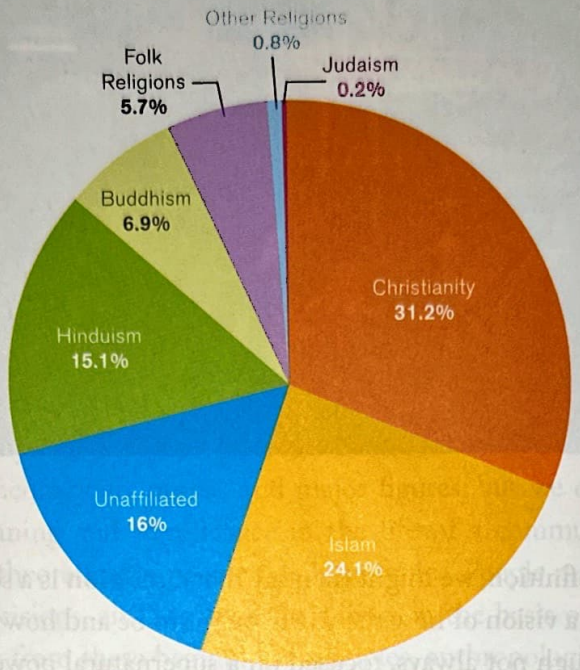
religion: A set of beliefs and rituals based on a vision of how the world ought to be and how life ought to be lived, often, though not always, focused on a supernatural power and lived out in community.

As social scientists, anthropologists have largely been uninterested in questions of any religion's ultimate truth or falsity. Instead, we understand that religious worlds are real, meaningful, and powerful to those who live in them. Our task is to carefully illuminate those worlds for others by capturing their vivid inner life, sense of moral order, interactions with other systems of meaning and power, and dynamic public expressions—whether those expressions occur in a remote Chinese village temple or the most famous Catholic cathedral in Rome (Bowie 2006).

Local Expressions and Universal Definitions

Attention to local religious expressions complicates anthropologists' efforts to create a universal definition of religion. In a religious studies course, you would likely use a textbook that allocates one chapter for each of the largest world religions, including Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Chinese religion, Sikhism, Judaism, and others. Each chapter might include an overview of the religion's history, theology, scriptures, major figures, and formal institutions.

FIGURE 15.1 RELIGION IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE
This chart shows the estimated relative distribution of adherents to the major world religions. It is worth noting, however, that few countries collect data on religious beliefs and practices; as discussed in the chapter, local religious expressions may not neatly fit these categories.



SOURCE: *Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. April 5, 2017. "The Changing Global Religious Landscape." Pew Research Center. www.pewforum.org/2017/04/05/the-changing-global-religious-landscape.*

Under such an approach, drawing broad comparisons among the major religions can prove helpful in outlining the world's most established religious traditions and in understanding each religion's ideal expression. At the same time, it may obscure the creative and flexible ways people actually practice their religion—in many cases, ways that diverge from the ideal.

Indeed, local expressions and creative adaptations are often at the heart of anthropological research because they reveal how people make a religious tradition come alive in their own context. Consider Islam. Muslims and non-Muslims alike generally regard Islam as highly uniform wherever it is practiced—as a religion that would consistently manifest its core characteristics and definition regardless of location. For example, all Muslims are expected to follow the Five Pillars of Islam: making a declaration of faith, saying prayers five times a day, performing acts of charity, fasting during the holy month of Ramadan, and undertaking a pilgrimage to Mecca. In addition, all Muslims revere the authority of the Koran and the Prophet Muhammad. But on the local level, Muslims frequently expand these formal borders and develop

modes of popular expression that may include distinctive devotional practices, life-cycle rituals, marriage customs, ritual clothing, and forms of veiling.

Awareness of the ways in which Muslim life and religious practice vary regionally and locally, such as between Sunni and Shia Muslims in the Middle East, can offer important insights to an anthropologist conducting research or to anyone seeking to build relationships across religious boundaries. The examples that follow illustrate the possibilities for local variation within a religious tradition that is often assumed to be universal in its expressions.

A Muslim Saint Shrine Across India, certain popular expressions of Islam push the boundaries of what many people would consider traditional Islam. One example is Husain Tekri, a Muslim saint shrine, or *dargah*, named in memory of the martyred grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. (A **martyr** is a person who sacrifices their life for the sake of their religion.) Pilgrims from across northern India come to this shrine to remember Husain Tekri, to venerate the Muslim saints, and to participate in healing rituals. (A **saint** is an individual considered exceptionally close to God who is exalted after death.) Husain Tekri is part of the religious healing circuit of northern India along which both Hindu and Muslim pilgrims travel as they seek the saint or deity with the specific power to cure their ills.

martyr: A person who sacrifices their life for the sake of their religion.

saint: An individual considered exceptionally close to God who is exalted after death.

Pilgrims to Husain Tekri may stay for a day or settle in nearby lodges and remain for days, months, or a year. They come in search of healing from suffering, illness, and financial ruin and for relief from the presence of evil spirits. The main daily ritual activity is the burning and distribution of *loban*—rocklike

Hindu and Muslim pilgrims at the Husain Tekri shrine in northern India breathe in incense to access the healing powers of the shrine.

chunks of incense sold at the shrine and thrown onto red-hot coals eight times a day. As the white smoke of *loban* billows from the braziers, pilgrims—both men and women—are engulfed in the cloud, breathe in the smoke, symbolically consume the *loban*, and absorb its potency. Through pilgrimage and the ritual consumption of *loban*, pilgrims access the healing powers of the shrine. There, they believe, the power and mercy of the martyred Husain and his family enable them to escape their sick bodies, their mental anguish, and the malevolent spirits possessing them.

Surprisingly, pilgrims to the shrine of Husain Tekri are of many religious backgrounds—not only Muslim but also Hindu, Sikh, and Jain. Seeking healing across religious lines is common in many parts of India, as pilgrims of various faiths try multiple religious systems to find the most successful means of healing, especially for illnesses beyond the powers of mainstream medicine (Bellamy 2011; Flueckiger 2006).

Amma's Healing Room Another local practice in India involves the healing powers of just one individual: a woman named Amma. In a small courtyard in the southern Indian city of Hyderabad, this Muslim healer meets forty or fifty patients a day. They come to her for healing from all manner of mental, spiritual, and physical illnesses brought on by evil spirits and forces.

As at the saint shrine of Husain Tekri, people of many faiths come to Amma—Hindus, Muslims, even a few Christians—directed by word of mouth or drawn to her healing room by the green flag of a saint shrine flying above

Amma (*right*), a Muslim healer in Hyderabad, India, writes out charms and remedies at her healing table for pilgrims afflicted by mental, spiritual, and physical illnesses.

the courtyard. They come to be cured of illnesses that seem beyond the power of their medical doctors or that require treatments beyond their financial means. At a low table in her healing room, surrounded by dozens of patients and disciples, Amma listens to each patient's problems and writes healing charms and remedies (such as verses from the Koran, numbers, or names of God) on an amulet, often a small fabric pouch or metal box, which the patient hangs on their right upper arm or around their neck for spiritual protection.

Amma's healing room crosses seemingly rigid boundaries of religious categories. In one sense, it does so in terms of the ease and comfort with which practitioners of various faiths seek healing in the same place. In another sense, it does so because a female Muslim healer takes a position of spiritual leadership that in Islam would usually be reserved for men (Flueckiger 2006).

The examples of Amma and Husain Tekri suggest that what often seem to be clearly defined, universally uniform, and consistent world religions are actually flexible and innovative at the local level. This borrowing and border crossing of elements between two or more religions, sometimes called a *syncretic religion*, creates new and unexpected possibilities for religious expression (Basquiat, 2004; see also Haitian rara bands discussed in Chapter 17, "Art and Media"). Certainly, the pilgrims of Husain Tekri and the visitors to Amma's healing room consider their practices to be mainstream local religious activity. From an anthropological perspective, such local expressions of religion are no less complete, meaningful, or true than those taught in the most elite Muslim madrassa, Buddhist monastery, or Christian school of theology.

What Tools Do Anthropologists Use to Understand How Religion Works?

» Compare different theoretical approaches to the anthropological study of religion.

Anthropologists have developed a set of key insights about how religion works that serve as a toolkit for understanding religion as we experience it in our fieldwork. These concepts may prove useful to you in thinking about religion in your own life and in your community, nation, and the world.

Anthropological theories of religion have been deeply influenced by the ideas of nineteenth- and twentieth-century social scientists Émile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Max Weber. All three examined the connection between religion and the political and economic upheavals of their time: an Industrial Revolution that spurred massive shifts in land tenure patterns throughout

western Europe; large-scale rural-to-urban migration; and high levels of unemployment, poverty, and disease. Through their writing, Durkheim, Marx, and Weber reshaped the study of religion, moving from the theological and cosmological orientation that dominated pre-twentieth-century European and North American thinking to focus on the role of religion in society. These thinkers have inspired generations of anthropologists, who have in turn expanded and refined these early theories.

Émile Durkheim: The Sacred and the Profane

Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) was a French sociologist who explored ideas of the **sacred** (holy) and the **profane** (unholy) as well as the practical effects of religious **ritual**. His work in these areas has provided key analytical tools for social scientists seeking to understand common elements across different religious movements and the practical application of religious ideas in the social life of religious adherents.

sacred: Anything that is considered holy.

profane: Anything that is considered unholy.

ritual: An act or series of acts regularly repeated over years or generations that embodies the beliefs of a group of people and creates a sense of continuity and belonging.

Developing the notion of a fundamental dichotomy between sacred and profane, Durkheim defined religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them" ([1912] 1965, 62). Durkheim saw religion as ultimately social—something practiced with others—not private or individual. Through the collective action of religious ritual, group members reaffirm, clarify, and define for one another what is sacred and what is profane. Durkheim's famous study *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) examined the religious beliefs and practices of Indigenous Australians, whom he and others believed to have the most primitive culture of the time and thus to practice religion in a manner closest to its "original" forms. The Indigenous "elementary" religious beliefs and practices, he believed, could reveal the most basic elements of religion and shed light on religion's evolution into its present forms.

French sociologist Émile Durkheim.

As western European societies experienced radical transformations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Durkheim (1897) turned to the rising suicide rate at the time, particularly the problem of *anomie*—an alienation that individuals experience when faced with physical dislocation and the disruption of their social networks and group values. He wondered how society would overcome this crisis and reestablish its essential cohesion. Durkheim argued that religion, particularly religious ritual, plays a crucial role in combating anomie and addressing societal alienation and dislocation by creating social solidarity, cohesion, and stability. He saw religion as the glue that holds together society's many different pieces. Through ritual, Durkheim believed, society can regenerate its sense of social solidarity and connection. Ritual defines and reinforces collective ideas of the sacred and profane; thus, it reaffirms the

community's sense of cosmic order, regenerates its social solidarity, and ensures the group's continued survival and growth.

Religion and Ritual

Durkheim's work has influenced many anthropologists of religion. The focus on how individuals and communities manifest religion in their everyday lives—particularly, how they enact it through ritual—has become a cornerstone of the anthropological approach to the study of religion. Anthropologists are aware that religion is not so much talked about as it is *performed* in public displays, rites, and rituals—not so much thought about as *danced* and *sung*. Rituals make the beliefs and passions of a group of people come alive. When performed repeatedly over years and generations, as Durkheim suggested, they create a sense of continuity and belonging that defines a group and regenerates its sense of solidarity, history, purpose, and meaning.

Rites of Passage French ethnographer and folklorist Arnold van Gennep (1873–1957) first theorized a category of ritual called a **rite of passage** that enacts a change of status from one life stage to another, either for an individual or for a group (van Gennep 1908). Religious rites of passage are life-transition rituals marking moments of intense change, such as birth, coming of age, marriage, and death.

rite of passage: A category of ritual that enacts a change of status from one life stage to another, either for an individual or for a group.

Audrey Richards (1899–1984), a pioneering British woman in early male-dominated British anthropology, observed and recorded one such rite of passage in 1931 among the Bemba people of Zambia, central Africa. Their

(*Left*) Anthropologist Audrey Richards at work in Zambia, ca. 1931. (*Right*) Girls kneeling during the *chisungu*, a coming-of-age initiation ceremony among the Bemba people of Zambia. Have you experienced a coming-of-age ritual or other rite of passage?

MAP 15.1
Zambia

elaborate ritual, called the *chisungu*—a coming-of-age ceremony for a young teenage woman after her first menstruation and in preparation for marriage—was danced in eighteen separate ceremonies over one month in a ritual hut and the surrounding bush. Over fifty special *chisungu* songs and forty different pottery emblems were involved. The *chisungu*, exclusively a women's ritual, provided magical protection to the girl and her family from the physical dangers of puberty and the magical dangers associated with the first act of intercourse in legal marriage. Within the rituals, older women also passed down the songs, sacred stories, sacred teachings, and secret lore of Bemba womanhood, marking a clear change of status within the tribe from girl to woman (Richards 1956).

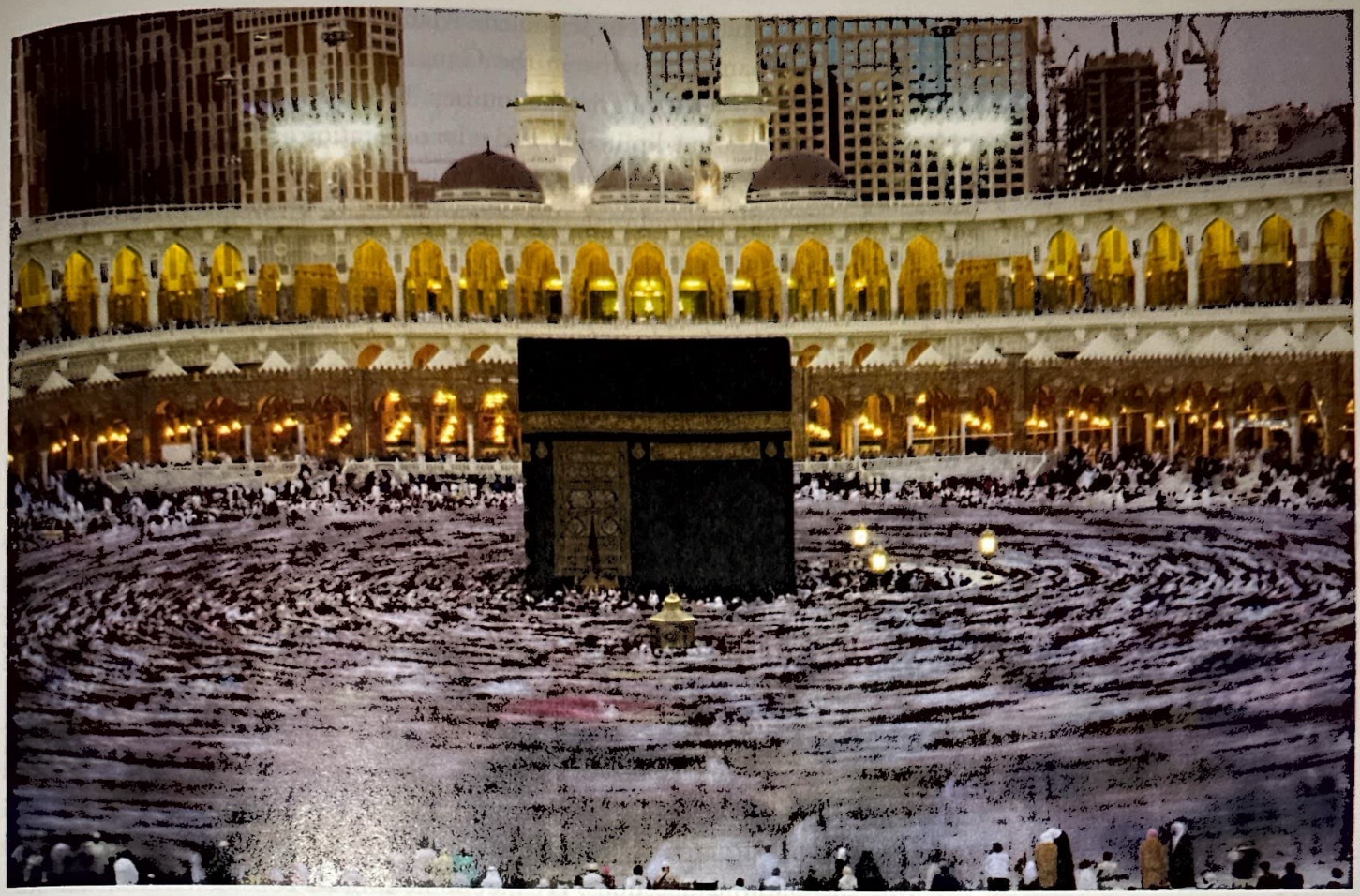
Victor Turner (1920–1983) built on Richards's pioneering work to explore why rituals and rites of passage are so powerful across religions and cultures. Drawing on his own research in Africa and on extensive comparisons of cross-cultural data, Turner theorized that the power of ritual comes from the drama contained within it, in which the normal structure of social life is symbolically dissolved and reconstituted. He identified three primary stages in all rites of passage. First, the individual experiences *separation*—physically, psychologically, or symbolically—from the normal, day-to-day activities of the group. This may involve going to a special ritual place, wearing special clothing, or performing actions such as shaving one's head. The second stage, **liminality**, involves a period of outsiderhood during which the ritual participant is set apart from normal society, existing on the margins of everyday life. From this position, the individual can gain a new perspective on the past, the present, or the future and thereby experience a new relationship to the community. The final ritual stage, *reaggregation* or *reincorporation*, returns the individual to everyday life and reintegrates them into the ritual community, transformed by the experience of liminality and endowed with a deeper sense of meaning, purpose, and connection to the larger group (Turner 1969).

liminality: One stage in a rite of passage during which a ritual participant experiences a period of outsiderhood, set apart from normal society, that is key to achieving a new perspective on the past, present, and future community.

Turner believed that all humans experience these rites of passage and that the experiences shape their perceptions of themselves and their community. Through them, he asserted, humans develop **communitas**: a sense of camaraderie, a common vision of what constitutes the good life, and perhaps most important, a commitment to take social action toward achieving this vision. Turner felt that the universal practice and experience of ritual reveals at the root of human existence an underlying desire for community and connection. Based on his cross-cultural investigation of the practice of rituals and rites of passage, Turner suggested that at the center of all human relationships lies a deep longing for shared meaning and connection, not a desire for self-preservation or material gain.

communitas: A sense of camaraderie, a common vision of what constitutes the good life, and a commitment to take social action toward achieving this vision that is shaped by the common experience of rites of passage.

Have you experienced a rite of passage such as van Gennep, Richards, and Turner describe? Perhaps you have traversed these ritual stages of separation,



Pilgrims circumambulate the Kaaba in Al Masjid al-Haram, the most sacred mosque in Islam, during the hajj, in Mecca, Saudi Arabia.

liminality, and reincorporation at some point in your life—at a coming-of-age ceremony in your own religious tradition or at a wedding or funeral. If so, can you recall the feeling as you put aside the mundane rhythms of everyday life, entered a liminal space apart from normal society (perhaps in a church, synagogue, mosque, temple, gurdwara, wedding hall, or funeral parlor set aside for sacred rituals), and then reentered the regular flow of the world with a new outlook or thinking a bit more deeply about the meaning of life? Perhaps, then, you also have a sense of the communitas that Turner suggests emerges from these common experiences that all humans share at some point in their lives.

Pilgrimage Turner applied his thinking about rites of passage to the study of religious pilgrimage, which he considered to be a unique form of religious ritual. Pilgrimage rituals—like those to Muslim saint shrines in northern India, as discussed earlier—exist in religions around the world. In a **pilgrimage,** adherents travel to sacred places as a sign of devotion and in search of transformation and enlightenment. For example, all Muslims are obliged to perform, if life circumstances allow, the hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. Jews, Christians, and Muslims

pilgrimage: A religious journey to a sacred place as a sign of devotion and in search of transformation and enlightenment.

all have pilgrimage sites in Jerusalem. Many Hindus travel to the holy city of Varanasi (Benares) to bathe in the Ganges River. Daoists climb Mount Tai in eastern China. The pilgrimage journey, Turner suggested, involves the same process of separation, liminality, and reincorporation associated with other rites of passage. Similarly, pilgrimage creates a shared sense of communitas among those who undertake the journey, even if years or entire generations separate the trips (Coleman 2021).

For Turner (1969), life in society is a process of becoming, not being; it is a process of change. He maintained that rituals, pilgrimages, celebrations, and even theatrical performances facilitate this process and have the potential to initiate and foster change—not only in the individual but also in the larger culture.

"The Abominations of Leviticus" The British anthropologist Mary Douglas (1921–2007), like Richards and Turner, began her studies of ritual in Africa. Subsequently, she applied her insights to Western cultures by drawing parallels between the ceremonies and ritual practices she studied in Africa and those of Christianity and Judaism. In *Purity and Danger* (1966), Douglas explored the ways that Durkheim's notions of sacred and profane—for Douglas, purity and danger—are deeply embedded in Western traditions.

In a famous chapter called "The Abominations of Leviticus," she examined the ritual practices of Jewish dietary codes. She approached this study with the following questions: Why are some animals considered clean and others unclean in God's eyes according to the book of Leviticus in the Hebrew scriptures? Do these practices reflect medical concerns about eating pork that might be infected by trichinosis? Or ethical guidelines about the treatment of animals? Are they arbitrary religious prescriptions? After concluding her study, Douglas argued instead that these codes reflect a deep-seated desire for order in the midst of the social chaos that confronted the Hebrew people of that time.

At the time the dietary codes were written, the Hebrew people struggled with their return from captivity and exile. The codes helped define the community and make clear who was and was not a Jew. In this way, they protected the community from the dangers of foreign influence. How did the Hebrew people create order out of chaos? And how could they keep God's commandments constantly in mind? The dietary laws, Douglas suggested, were a command to be holy. Thus, they became a metaphor of holiness. Keeping the dietary laws daily became a ritualized meditation—a reminder of the holiness of God, who is always present in their lives.

Douglas maintained that adhering to Jewish dietary laws plays the same role today. The ritual rules of dietary discipline serve as a regular reminder of who God is and who the individual is in relationship to God. These rituals are a

kind of meditative practice that regularizes moments of liminality in the course of daily life. Are there similar practices or requirements in your religious tradition that serve as a reminder, a command to be holy? Do you observe religious dietary restrictions? Do you wear certain clothes or jewelry? Do you wear a cross, a bindi, or a hijab? Do you style your hair in a certain way? Are you called to daily prayer during the day or at night? Do you say a prayer before meals? If you answered yes to any of these questions, perhaps you can personally assess Douglas's insights. And perhaps you have a sense of the power that ritual action can hold in a person's or a group's daily life.

Karl Marx: Religion as "the Opium of the People"

Karl Marx (1818–1883) was a German political philosopher. He is primarily known for his *Communist Manifesto* (with Friedrich Engels, 1848) and *Capital* (1867), a radical critique of the capitalist economics emerging in western Europe in the nineteenth century (see Chapter 11). However, Marx was also highly critical of the role of religion in society, famously calling religion "the opium of the people" (Marx and Engels 1957). What did he mean?

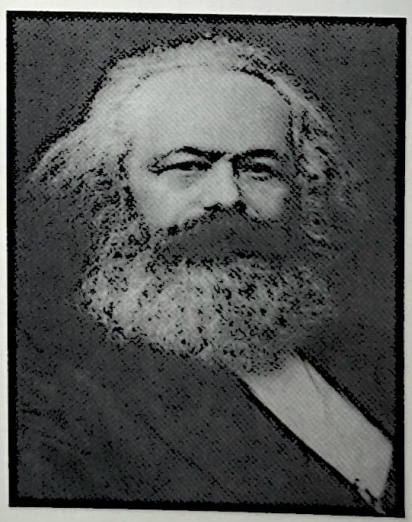
In a time of economic upheaval and intensifying social stratification, Marx warned that religion was like a narcotic: It dulled people's pain so they did not realize how serious the situation was. Religion, Marx argued, played a key role in keeping the proletariat—the working poor—from engaging in the revolutionary social change that he believed was needed to improve their situation.

Marx's statement that religion is "the opium of the people" fits within his larger social analysis. He believed that throughout human history, economic realities have formed the foundation of social life and have generated society's primary dynamics, including class stratification and class struggle. He called these economic realities "the base." In his view, all other institutions of culture (including family, government, arts, and notably, religion) arise from and are shaped by economic realities and deep tensions of economic inequality and class struggle.

The role of these institutions, according to Marx, is to mask the material conditions and exploitation at the economic base and to contain—or provide a controlled release for—the tensions generated by class difference and class conflict. Religion, which Marx also called "the sigh of the oppressed," could provide to the downtrodden a sense of consolation that the sufferings of this life would end and be rewarded in heaven, thereby offering divine justification for the economic status quo.

Marx's overall focus on economics and power has pushed anthropologists to consider the relationship between religion and power. Contemporary studies move beyond Marx's idea that religion is merely an illusion that blinds people to economic realities. Studies like those of Adam Chau (2006), David Edwards

German political philosopher Karl Marx.



(2017), and Charlene Floyd (1996; considered later in this chapter), while not drawing directly on Marxist theory, examine how religion can play a complex role in systems of power—both by exercising power through economic resources and the mobilization of religious personnel and by resisting systems of oppression through alternative ideas, symbols, and resources.

Religion and Cultural Materialism Anthropologist Marvin Harris (1927–2001) built on Marx's analysis of the base, or infrastructure, and the way in which a society's material conditions shape its other components. Harris's theory of **cultural materialism** argued that material conditions, including technology and the environment, determine patterns of social organization. In this view, human culture is a response to the practical problems of earthly existence. In *Cows, Pigs, Wars, and Witches* (1974), Harris turned this perspective toward perplexing human behaviors, including why Hindus venerate the cow, why Jews and Muslims abstain from eating pork, and why some people believe in witches. Harris proposed that these practices might have developed in response to very practical problems as people sought to adapt to their natural environment.

cultural materialism: A theory that argues material conditions, including technology and the environment, determine patterns of social organization, such as religious principles.

Have you ever wondered why cows are considered sacred in India? Harris approached this question not through personal immersion in the worldviews of Indian Hindus but rather by exploring larger environmental forces—the cultural ecology—that might promote this cultural practice. If you visit India, you will find zebu cows—a large-humped cattle species found in Africa and Asia—wandering freely about city streets and rural areas. These cows eat food from market stalls, graze on sidewalk shrubs, and defecate indiscriminately. In a country with deep pockets of poverty and malnutrition, why are these cows left to roam and not slaughtered for nutritious, protein-rich beef?

Eating beef is prohibited in Hinduism, as is eating all meat. The cow, in Harris's view, became a symbol of *ahimsa*—the practice of nonviolence and respect for the unity of all life that is key to Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. How this tradition began is unclear, but today the holy mother cow is a symbol of health and abundance, and its image appears throughout Indian culture in media such as posters, movies, and carvings. The symbol also has a literal presence on streets and in fields.

MAP 15.2
India

Harris suggests that religious prohibitions protecting the cow have overwhelming practical applications in a culture that relies on agricultural production. Cows, after all, produce calves that grow up to be oxen, which Harris calls the tractor, thresher, and family car of the Indian agricultural system. Without an ox, a family has no way of planting, harvesting, preparing, or transporting its crops. Without an ox, a family loses the capacity to farm and eventually loses its land. Cows also produce vast quantities of dung, almost all of which can be recycled into fertilizer and cooking fuel. Religious dedication to *ahimsa*

A sacred cow lies unperturbed and undisturbed in a busy intersection of Varanasi, India. Why is the cow sacred in India?

protects this resource even under the most difficult economic conditions. No matter how hungry the family may be in one season, keeping the cow alive ensures long-term survival.

For Harris, religiously based practices that appear to function in opposition to sound nutritional practices or economic development strategies may in fact be very rational cultural adaptations to the surrounding ecology. In India, the cow is extraordinarily useful. Its protection, especially during difficult economic times, may be essential to the long-term stability and survival of the Indian people and culture.

Think about any other religion, perhaps one you have an affiliation with. Can you apply the perspectives of Harris's cultural materialism to any of its practices and beliefs? Can you begin to imagine how certain material conditions of everyday life may have shaped patterns of religious belief and practice?

Max Weber: The Protestant Ethic and Secularization

Max Weber (1864–1920), a German sociologist, philosopher, and economist, considered religious ideas to be key to understanding the unique development of societies worldwide and the rise of industrial capitalism, particularly in western Europe.

German sociologist and philosopher Max Weber.

Unlike Marx, who argued that economic realities ultimately shape society, Weber believed that ideas, including religious ideas, could be equally powerful. His book *Sociology of Religion* (1920) was the first sociological attempt to compare the world's religions. In it, Weber suggested that Asian religious beliefs and ethical systems had held Asian economies back from capitalist economic growth along the western European path. China, India, and other cultures had developed aspects of modern capitalism even earlier than western Europe did, but without a certain kind of ideological support, a more advanced capitalism had not evolved in Asia. Weber suggested that economic innovations alone could not explain the two regions' different paths.

In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), Weber suggested that the ascetic values of self-denial and self-discipline that developed in western European Protestantism provided the ethic that was necessary for capitalism to flourish. Certain Protestant sects, including Calvinists, expressed their religious beliefs and values in a daily lifestyle of thrift, discipline, and hard work. In these ideas, Weber found evidence of the ethical and psychological framework necessary for the success of industrial capitalism.

Also key to the development of Western capitalism, according to Weber, was an evolution of religious ideas and practices toward increasing systematization: Tradition, sentiment, and charismatic leadership would be replaced by rational bureaucracies with intelligible and predictable rules. Weber imagined a gradual rationalization in religion that would evolve from (1) traditional religion based on magic and led by shamans to (2) charismatic religion based on the persuasive power of prophets such as Buddha, Jesus, and Moses and, finally, to (3) rational religion based on legal codes of conduct, bureaucratic structures, and formally trained religious leaders. He anticipated that this evolutionary process would be almost inevitable. But he warned that as society became more rationalized, it also risked becoming more **secular**—less religious—and thus losing the very spirit that had driven its success and development.

secular: Without religious or spiritual basis.

Scholars have debated Weber's secularization thesis for many years (Asad 1993; Berger 1999; Casanova 1994; Stark and Bainbridge 1985). Certainly, in western Europe today, religious identification among native-born residents continues to sink to record lows. In contrast, the United States stands as a striking exception to this pattern in industrialized countries, as religious beliefs and practices remain strong in both the native-born and immigrant populations. Between 1944 and 2011, polls consistently showed that nearly 90 percent of the U.S. population believed in God, and although there has been a slight dip among younger adults, 81 percent of Americans still believe in God (Gallup 2022). Even the assumed separation of church and state in the United States is far from absolute. Battles continue over the teaching of evolution in the science curriculums of public schools, fans at public high school football games

in Texas rise to recite the Christian Lord's Prayer, and crowds at New York's Yankee Stadium stand during the seventh-inning stretch for a moment of silence to remember those serving in the U.S. military and then sing "God Bless America." In these instances, religious sentiments infuse public and political life, and public rituals of civil society take on sacred status (Bellah 1980).

Moreover, widespread revivals of religious ideas, organizations, and movements around the world in the face of increasing modernization—and at times in resistance to the homogenizing influences of globalization and Western culture—provide additional evidence that modernization does not always lead to secularization.

Shamanism

Throughout much of human history, communities' religious needs have been served by **shamans**—local religious practitioners with special abilities to connect individuals with supernatural powers or beings. More formal religious organizations with trained specialists and elaborate moral rules and ritual practices are fairly recent, spanning 2,000 to 3,000 years at most with the rise of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The term *shaman* derives from the name given to healing specialists among the seminomadic people of Siberia, but it has since been applied to healers, spiritualists, witches, and witch doctors in cultures worldwide.

shamans: Local religious practitioners with abilities to connect individuals with supernatural powers or beings to provide special knowledge and power for healing, guidance, and wisdom.

Shamans live as part of the local community and participate in daily activities and work, but they are called on at times to perform special rituals and ceremonies. They often gain their powers through special training or experience that involves passing through a journey or test of spirit, such as illness, isolation, physical pain, or an emotional ordeal. Through rituals involving prayers, meditation, songs, dance, pain, or drugs, shamans enter a trance, often at will. While entranced, they implore deities and powers to take action or to provide special knowledge and power that may assist individuals or the community at large—whether in the form of healing, medicinal advice, personal guidance, protection from illness or other attack, fortune telling, or control over the weather.

Anthropologist Laurel Kendall studied both the public and private rituals of women shamans in a small rural community in South Korea. In the opening scene of her book, *Shamans, Housewives, and Other Restless Spirits* (1985), Kendall describes a *kut*—a public shamanistic ritual. This event was officiated by several women shamans who called on local gods, deceased ancestors, and related spirits, including warriors and generals, through a dramatic performance involving costumes, music, dances, and trancelike states. The shamans pleaded, cajoled, and bribed these spirits to help those in the present world address problems with troublesome children, drunken husbands, economic struggles, illness, and other maladies and fight off threats by meddling ghosts and spirits.

MAP 15.3
South Korea

Each shaman invoked certain deities with whom she had developed a special relationship, and these deities in turn inhabited her during the ritual trances, dances, songs, and meditation. During such events, deities often weep, lament, and console the living through the words and actions of the shamans.

Kendall notes that public shamanistic rituals represent a professionalization of Korean household religion. Whereas trained and initiated shamans lead public rituals, in the home, untrained and uninitiated women frequently engage the same deities and spirits on behalf of their husbands and children in an attempt to diagnose and heal the family's ills—from disease to crop failure. In this Korean household religion—a complex blend of elements of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism—both shamans and housewives, Kendall argues, take on the roles not only of ritual specialists but also of creators of meaning for their families and communities (De Vos 1987; Kendall 1985, 1988; Spencer 1987).

Although the role of the shaman is generally associated with small agricultural or seminomadic societies, shamans today often relocate to contemporary urban settings along with their immigrant communities. A variation of the shaman role also occurs in more formal religious organizations, as trained religious specialists seek to intervene with deities on behalf of adherents or assist adherents in practices of prayer and meditation through which they seek healing or guidance.

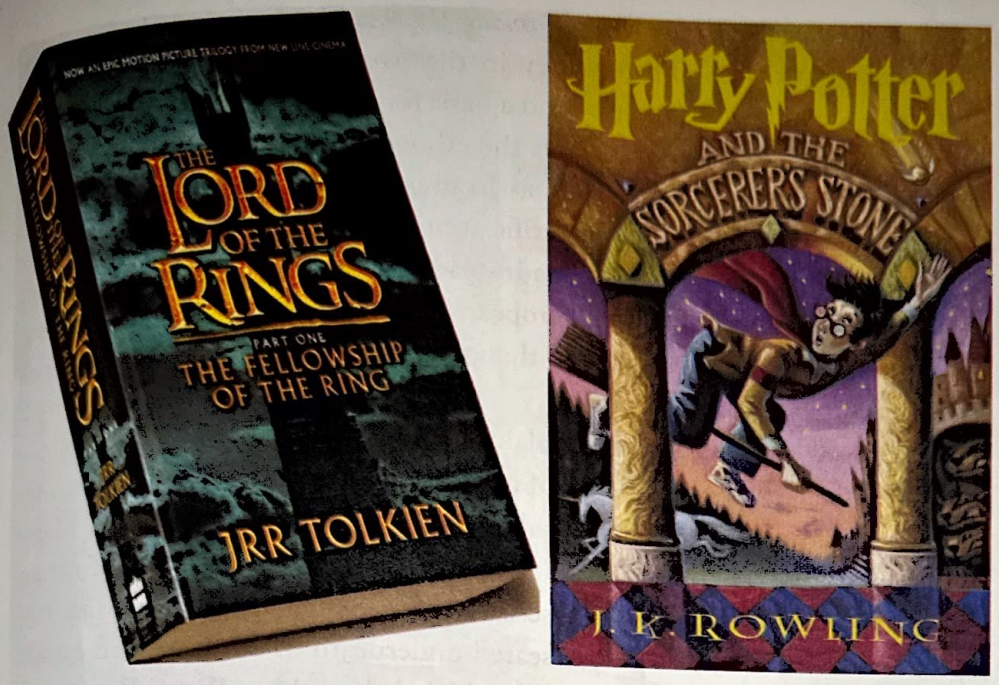
Religion and Magic

magic: The use of spells, incantations, words, and actions in an attempt to compel supernatural forces to act in certain ways, whether for good or for evil.

Anthropology has a long history of studying cultures in which magic is practiced and witches are real (Frazer 1890). **Magic** involves the use of spells, incantations, words, and actions in an attempt to compel supernatural forces to act in certain ways, whether for good or for evil. Magic is part of cultural practices in every part of the world. And religion, almost everywhere, contains some components of magic.

E. E. Evans-Pritchard: Rethinking the Logic of Magic E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1902–1973), a British anthropologist who conducted extensive fieldwork in Africa's southern Sudan region, challenged Weber's rationalization thesis that assumed modernization and the rise of science would bring increasing rationality to cultures and their religious practices, thereby leading to a decrease in practices of magic. Instead, Evans-Pritchard's research among the tribal Azande people from 1926 to 1930 found that their use of magic was not an irrational expression but a component of a highly organized, rational, and logical system of thought that complemented science in understanding how the world works.

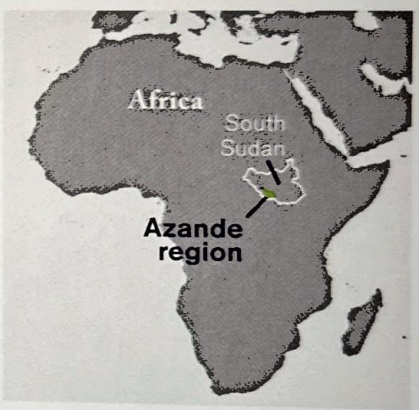
In *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande* (1937), Evans-Pritchard describes in careful detail the elaborate religious system of the Azande in which magic, witchcraft, and poison oracles are central elements of daily life and conversation. The Azande trace all misfortunes to witchcraft. Their witchcraft



The success of J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series has revealed a vast appetite in Western culture for magic, witches, and wizards, at least in their fantastical literary and cinematic forms.

does not involve rituals, spells, or medicines. Instead, it is a psychic power that may be used consciously or unconsciously by a witch—a woman or a man—to cause misfortunes or death. Witchcraft is inherited from a parent, and a witch's body contains a witchcraft substance (which the Azande described to Evans-Pritchard as an oval, blackish swelling or bag near the liver) that cannot be detected during life but can be found during an autopsy.

Magic among the Azande, in contrast to witchcraft, is performed consciously through rites, spells, the preparation of herbal medicines, and other magical techniques. Magic has its own power and can be used to combat witchcraft. If people perceive that witchcraft is being deployed against them, they may consult a witch doctor—almost always a man—who will use magic and medicines to try to thwart the work of the witch. Witch doctors are formally taught the knowledge of rituals and medicines as they are initiated into what amounts to a professional association. In the most extreme cases—those involving matters of life and death and those that have ended up in court—the witch doctor may consult a poison oracle. As described to Evans-Pritchard, the poison oracle is created by administering a dose of poison to a chicken, and its subsequent death or recovery exposes the innocence or guilt of the accused witch. Poison oracles may also be used to ascertain answers to questions posed by the witch doctor to resolve the case. The witch identified as the source of the evil witchcraft is then asked to cease the witchcraft. This person may claim ignorance, though, and proceed to plead with their own stomach—the location of the witchcraft in the body—to stop.



MAP 15.4
Azande region, South Sudan

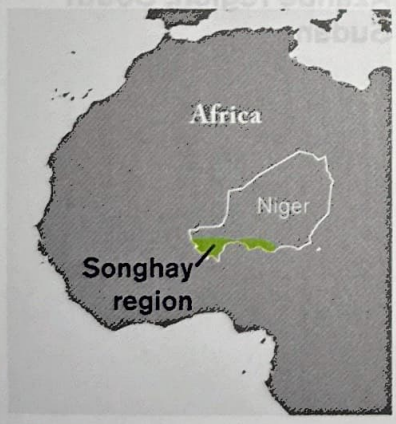
Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande is considered one of the outstanding works of anthropology in the twentieth century. It is both an exquisitely detailed ethnography and a basis for rethinking the role of magic in society: Evans-Pritchard challenges the ethnocentric views of Western scholars who dismiss magical practices as irrational and illogical when compared to modern, rational, Western scientific strategies for accumulating knowledge of the external world. He contends instead that Azande ideas that may seem exotic, strange, and irrational to Europeans in actuality formed consistent, comprehensive, and rational systems of thought within the context of the Azande's daily lives and social structures.

Among the Azande, magic explained things that did not make sense otherwise, particularly the experience of misfortune; it provided an alternative theory of causation that supplemented the theory of natural causation. Magic helped explain what could not be explained by the scientific study of nature. Evans-Pritchard presented the case of a wooden granary structure that collapsed and injured several people seated underneath it. Science could explain how insects had damaged the wood, which led to the collapse. But science could not explain why the people who were injured were sitting in that particular location at that particular time. For the Azande, witchcraft and magic could explain this misfortune.

Evans-Pritchard argued that the Azande saw no contradiction between witchcraft and empirical knowledge. For them, witchcraft and magic provided a rational and intellectually consistent explanation for what science could not explain. Belief in witchcraft only appears inconsistent and irrational, Evans-Pritchard chided his Western colleagues, when it is examined like a museum object on a shelf, outside the context of daily life.

Paul Stoller: *In Sorcery's Shadow* In the ethnography *In Sorcery's Shadow* (1987), anthropologist Paul Stoller and his co-author, Cheryl Olkes, extend Evans-Pritchard's commitment to respecting and understanding others' systems of knowledge—even if they at first appear irrational, unreasonable, and incomprehensible. Stoller takes Evans-Pritchard's work on magic and sorcery (another term for witchcraft) to a deeper, more personal level through direct engagement in the beliefs and practices of those he studied.

In the late 1970s, Stoller arrived in the Songhay region of the Republic of Niger, West Africa, to learn about the role of religion in community life there. Through intensive fieldwork covering five visits over eight years, his deep involvement in a world of magic, spirits, sorcery, and spirit possession prevalent in the Songhay and surrounding regions eventually led to his initiation as a sorcerer's apprentice. He memorized magical incantations. He ate special foods needed for his initiation. He ingested medicinal powders and wore magical



MAP 15.5
Songhay region, Niger

A sorcerer preparing a written tablet for a customer in the Songhay region of Niger.

objects to protect himself from antagonistic sorcerers. And he indirectly participated in an attack of sorcery that temporarily paralyzed the intended victim.

Stoller's fieldwork led him to reflect on the transformative and deeply personal experience of conducting research into people's religious worlds:

> For me, respect means accepting fully beliefs and phenomena which our system of knowledge often holds preposterous. I took my teachers seriously. They *knew* that I used divination in my personal life. They *knew* that I had eaten powders to protect myself. They *knew* I wore objects to demonstrate my respect for the spirits. They *knew* I had an altar in my house over which I recited incantations. They liked the way I carried my knowledge and power and taught me more and more. (Stoller 1987, 228)

Stoller's fieldwork came to an abrupt end, however, when he experienced an attack by spirits sent against him by a powerful village sorceress. Suffering the debilitating physical effects of the sorceress's attack, Stoller fled the village and returned home to the United States to finally rid himself of the illness:

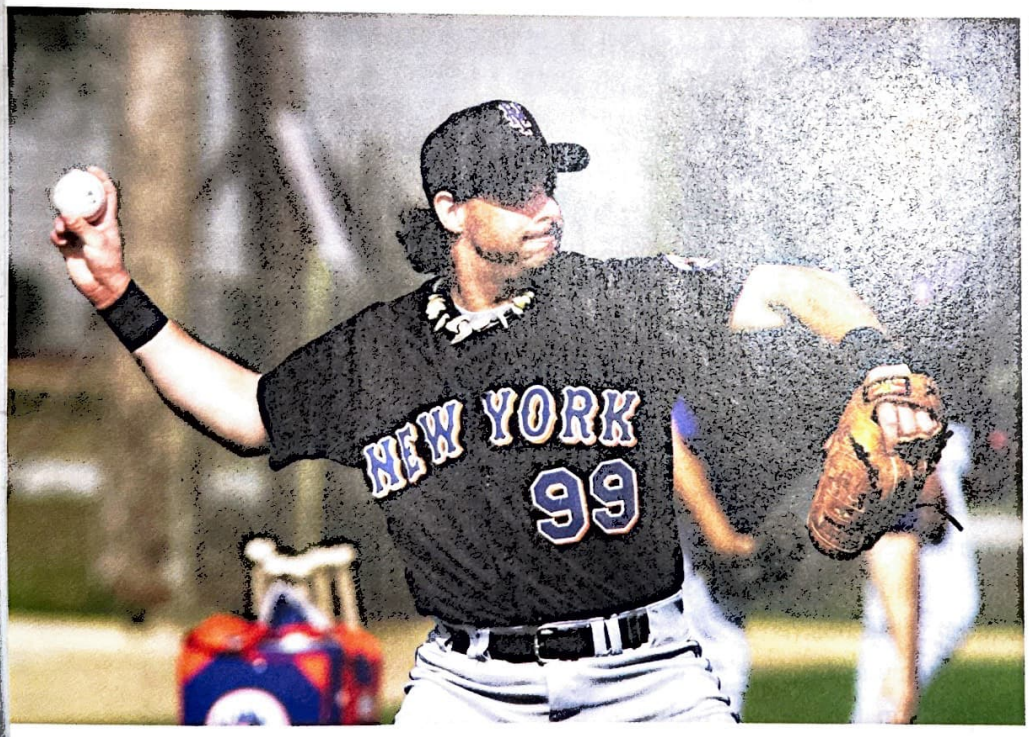
> But ethnographers can go too far. They can pursue the other's reality too hotly, crossing a line that brings them face to face with

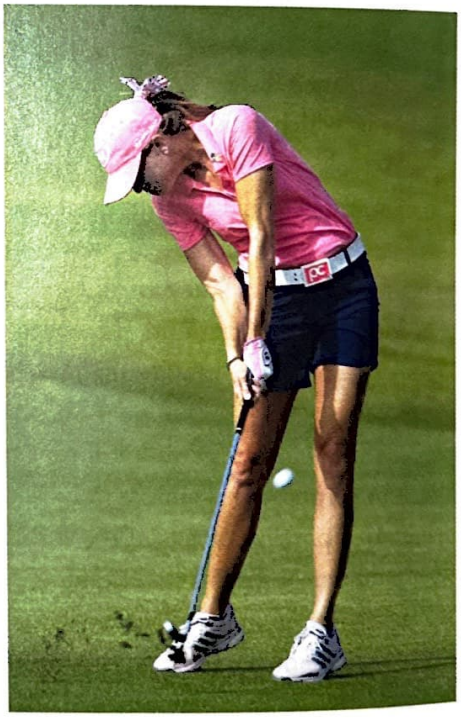
> a violent reality that is no mere epistemological exercise. If they know too much, they must swear an oath of silence. If they reveal what they shouldn't, they may be murdered. (Stoller 1987, 229)

Not every anthropologist apprentices with a sorcerer or is attacked by one. In this regard, Stoller's experience as an anthropologist of religion is an outlier in the field. But the anthropological commitment to long-term, in-depth participant observation brings many of us into close contact with the beliefs, practices, and emotions of those whom we study, an intimacy that often reveals the vibrant power of religion in their lives and leaves one marked by the encounter. Is it possible to comprehend someone's religious beliefs and practices without accepting that they are real—at least for the believer?

George Gmelch: Baseball Magic If reading about the work of Evans-Pritchard and Stoller leaves you relieved that you live in a Western world in which magic mostly appears in children's books and movies, research by anthropologist and former Minor League Baseball player George Gmelch may surprise you. It turns out that beliefs and practices of magic are more common in U.S. culture than you might think.

Gmelch's study of baseball in the United States (2017) explores the rituals, taboos, and sacred objects of magic that permeate the game. He finds that they reflect the kinds of beliefs and activities that are prevalent in all sports.





Magic rituals, taboos, and sacred objects are used constantly in American sports. (*Left*) Former New York Mets reliever Turk Wendell's magical practices included always leaping over the baseline when walking to the mound, brushing his teeth between innings, chewing black licorice while pitching, and wearing a necklace decorated with the teeth of wild animals he had hunted and killed. (*Right*) Professional golfer Paula Creamer believes that wearing pink during the final round of tournaments will bring her good luck.

Baseball players use charms such as special clothes or jewelry, and they believe that good magic is contagious. If a ritual or charm works one time, perhaps the magical conditions for success will be re-created if it's used again. Thus, players repeat certain actions to help them succeed: Pitchers touch the bill of their cap, wear good-luck charms, or never touch the foul line between home plate and first base when moving between the pitcher's mound and the dugout. Batters wear the same shirt or underwear, or use the same movements over and over again in the batter's box, to capture the magic of previous success.

Have you ever noticed certain ritual-like movements while watching close-ups of players during televised baseball games or other sporting events? Do you yourself have special charms, practices, or clothes that you believe will bring you good luck during games, exams, dates, and so on? What about jewelry or ornaments?

In What Ways Is Religion Both a System of Meaning and a System of Power?

» Analyze the role of religion in meaning making and mobilizing power.

Many people in Western cultures think of religion as a primarily personal matter. In the United States, for instance, doctrines promote an ideal of the separation of church (that is, religion) and state (politics). But as we saw in Chapter 2, any analysis of a cultural system that focuses solely on its underlying meanings risks ignoring how power is negotiated within the system and how the system engages other structures of power within the culture. This observation applies to our study of religion as well.

Religion and Meaning

Building on the themes of Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1926–2006), in his essay "Religion as a Cultural System" (1973b), suggests that religion is essentially a system of ideas surrounding a set of powerful **symbols**. Hindus, for example, consider the cow sacred because by protecting it they symbolically enact the protection of all life. Other widely recognized religious symbols include the cross for Christians, the Torah scroll for Jews, and the holy city of Mecca for Muslims. In Geertz's view, each symbol has deep meaning and evokes powerful emotions and motivations in the religion's followers. Why?

symbol: Anything that represents something else.

These symbols acquire significance far beyond the actual material they are made of. Objects of wood, metal, rock, or paper come to represent influential

explanations about what it means to be human and where humans fit in the general order of the universe. Symbols, with their deep pool of meaning, create a sense of order and resist chaos by building and reinforcing a larger worldview—a framework of ideas about what is real, what exists, and what that means.

We can see symbols at work in various religious contexts. For Christians, the bread and wine served in the communion ritual are more than actual bread and wine. They symbolically recall the death and resurrection of Jesus, the power of God to overcome death, and the promise to Jesus's followers of everlasting life beyond the suffering of this world. Communion also recalls the fellowship of all Christian believers who share in the benefits of God's sacrifice and cultivates a sense of connection with people around the world. For Jews, the Torah scroll is more than a composite of paper and ink. It represents the holy word of God as revealed through the prophets, the story of a covenant between God and the people of Israel, an agreement that in return for faithfulness God will provide liberation from captivity, the establishment of a nation of people, and abundant life. For Hindus, the cow is venerated because it represents the Hindu practice of *ahimsa*—nonviolence toward all living things. In a practical sense, this means that no leather may enter the temple and all shoes must remain outside the temple door. Even these acts are symbolic of Hindus' belief that all life is sacred and that attention to this fact will transform the practicing individual and lead to their reincarnation as a more sentient being.

A Jewish worshipper holds up a Torah scroll to receive a blessing at the Western Wall, Judaism's holiest prayer site, in Jerusalem's Old City. How does an object made of paper and ink become a powerful symbol with deep religious meaning?

Geertz comments that these symbols and their underlying conceptions of reality become so matter-of-fact as they are expressed in familiar religious rituals and doctrines that believers feel their presence helps them move beyond mundane matters and experience what is "really real." Believers may have contact with the religious world only briefly or irregularly, especially in comparison with the ordinary world that they experience every day. Yet through the power of religious symbols, they feel the truth and presence of the religious world. Religious practice, ritual, and symbols provide access to that ultimate and sought-after reality.

Anthropologists encounter symbols and their powerful effects in numerous areas of our field, but the use of symbols in religious belief and practice is particularly pervasive and rich. As we will consider next, as anthropologists work to analyze the ongoing vitality of religion in today's globalizing age, understanding how symbols are constructed and given meaning and authority will be a valuable skill for navigating an increasingly interconnected world.

Religion and Power

Anthropologist Talal Asad, in his book *Genealogies of Religion* (1993), criticizes Geertz's explanation of religion. Asad bases his inquiry on questions such as these: How did religious symbols get their power? Who or what gave them their authority? What gives religion the power and authority to have meaning in people's lives? After all, Asad asserts, symbols do not have meaning in and of themselves. He suggests that religion and religious symbols are actually produced through complex historical and social developments in which power and meaning are created, contested, and maintained. What historical processes have given the cross, the Torah, the hajj, and the cow their symbolic power? Without understanding these particular **authorizing processes**, Asad claims, we cannot understand what really makes religion work.

authorizing process: The complex historical and social developments through which symbols are given power and meaning.

Asad argues that most definitions of religion are not universal. Instead, he claims, they are the creations of Western scholars based on western European ideas of what religion is and how it works—in particular, the way Christianity has developed in relationship to the state. Such scholars look for Western ideas of religion in the spiritual and ritual practices of other cultures. Asad warns that these attempts to create a universal definition impede our understanding of religion in other parts of the world. For instance, he suggests that Weber's assumptions about the arc of religious societies toward secularization are rooted in the way Western Christianity has developed—not in a universal pattern that we can assume exists in religions worldwide.

In the case of Islam, religious beliefs and political power are intricately intertwined in many countries, and national governments may seek to impose a version of Islamic religious law, the Sharia, through mechanisms of the state. Asad

suggests that in these cases, Western understandings of religion that assume increasing secularization and separation of church and state may lead scholars and casual observers to dismiss other expressions of religion as irrational and backward. Instead, these other religious expressions are simply different—that is, outside the normative definition of religion established in Western scholarship. Asad states that scholars of religion must beware the power of universal definitions to obscure local realities. They must carefully examine how religion is expressed locally, how those expressions developed over time, and what has given those expressions the power and authority to be so meaningful to believers (Asad 1993).

Thinking like an anthropologist of religion, try to examine religious symbols from the perspectives of both Geertz and Asad. As you consider religious symbols in the culture around you—perhaps in your own religious tradition—can you begin to appreciate symbols' power to evoke intense emotions and motivations that put believers in touch with what feels "really real"? Can you begin to consider how particular symbols have been constructed, given meaning, and authorized through particular historical and cultural processes? The Your Turn exercise on p. 606 will give you an opportunity to transform these new insights into analytical tools.

Blurring the Boundaries between Meaning and Power

The work of both Geertz and Asad has influenced contemporary anthropological research on religion. We now consider local examples of religious activities and organizations in which meaning and power are intertwined and the boundaries between religion and other social systems of power are not rigid. As we consider these studies, can you begin to see how analyses of both meaning and power are essential to achieving a comprehensive picture of the role of religion in culture?

MAP 15.6
Shaanbei, China

China's Religious Revival Since the 1990s, a religious revival has been spreading across urban and rural China. After years of attempts by the Chinese government to eradicate religious practices, especially popular folk religious activities, today, the Chinese population is rebuilding temples, restoring graves, and re-creating religious festivals. The Chinese state officially recognizes Buddhism, Daoism, Protestant Christianity, Catholicism, and Islam, and all are experiencing growth and revitalization. However, the most vibrant expansion of religious activity is among practitioners of Chinese popular religion—a tradition that incorporates elements of Buddhism, Daoism, and the veneration of family and village ancestors.

The Black Dragon King Temple complex in Shaanbei, China, is the center of one such revival. The site—a small, isolated shrine in the early 1980s—has been

transformed into a large temple complex with many buildings and year-round activity. The temple is now a catalyst for religious revival, the renewal of folk cultural traditions, and the development of community economic activity. It also serves as a site for negotiating relationships among popular religion, the Chinese state, and the surrounding rural, agricultural society.

Village religious life throughout China today includes elaborate public funerals, weddings, grave sweeping, the burning of spirit paper money for ancestors, the avoidance of hungry ghosts (ancestors who have no family looking after them), and the seeking of favor from a wide variety of deities. Each village has at least one god, sometimes more, and the area's deities are ranked according to their *ling*, or magical efficacy (in other words, how well they are able to get the job done). People pray to these gods for practical benefits in times of trouble, to resolve conflicts, to protect the souls of sick children, to heal illnesses and maladies, to offer advice on matters ranging from matchmaking to business dealings, and to send rain in times of drought.

The village temples become the central location for praying, presenting offerings, buying incense and spirit paper money, performing public rituals, and hosting religious festivals. Villagers may pray to many gods—any they think may be able to help them. Visiting different temples and shrines in several villages is quite common; people believe this practice will not incite the wrath of jealous gods as long as individuals offer proper thanks when requests are successfully granted and problems resolved.

The revival of popular religious life has generated activities well beyond the temple. Temple festivals have spurred the rebirth of opera performances, storytelling, folk dances, and various other folk cultural traditions. China's overall economic growth has translated into increased donations, as both local worshippers and visiting pilgrims contribute to temple renovations, sponsor rituals and festivals, and make gifts to honor the gods. Temple activities in turn generate income for the entire community.

Key to the Black Dragon King Temple's success is an active and effective temple leadership committee. At its head is Lao Wang, a visionary, energetic, and enterprising local resident. The temple association builds and maintains the temple and its structures, manages its funds, stages festivals, and negotiates with other social organizations and players. In addition, the temple leadership channels a portion of its economic proceeds to the construction of better roads, irrigation systems, and schools in the community. Such civic engagement has elevated the temple leaders' position in community affairs. In today's China, some people become part of the local elite by getting rich, whereas others are elevated through moral leadership. In this atmosphere, the temple leadership's economic activities and political influence have earned them their status as part of the local elite. Through the success of their religious organization, the temple

THE SOCIAL LIFE OF THINGS

Balinese Water Temples

Travelers to the Indonesian island of Bali may encounter large stone structures that look like religious temples. They *are* temples, but they are also the center of an elaborate—and crucial—part of how Indonesians feed themselves. For over 1,000 years, Balinese farmers have engineered a complex agricultural system of rice terraces and irrigation systems managed by a network of hundreds of water temples in a process studied by anthropologist Stephen Lansing (1987).

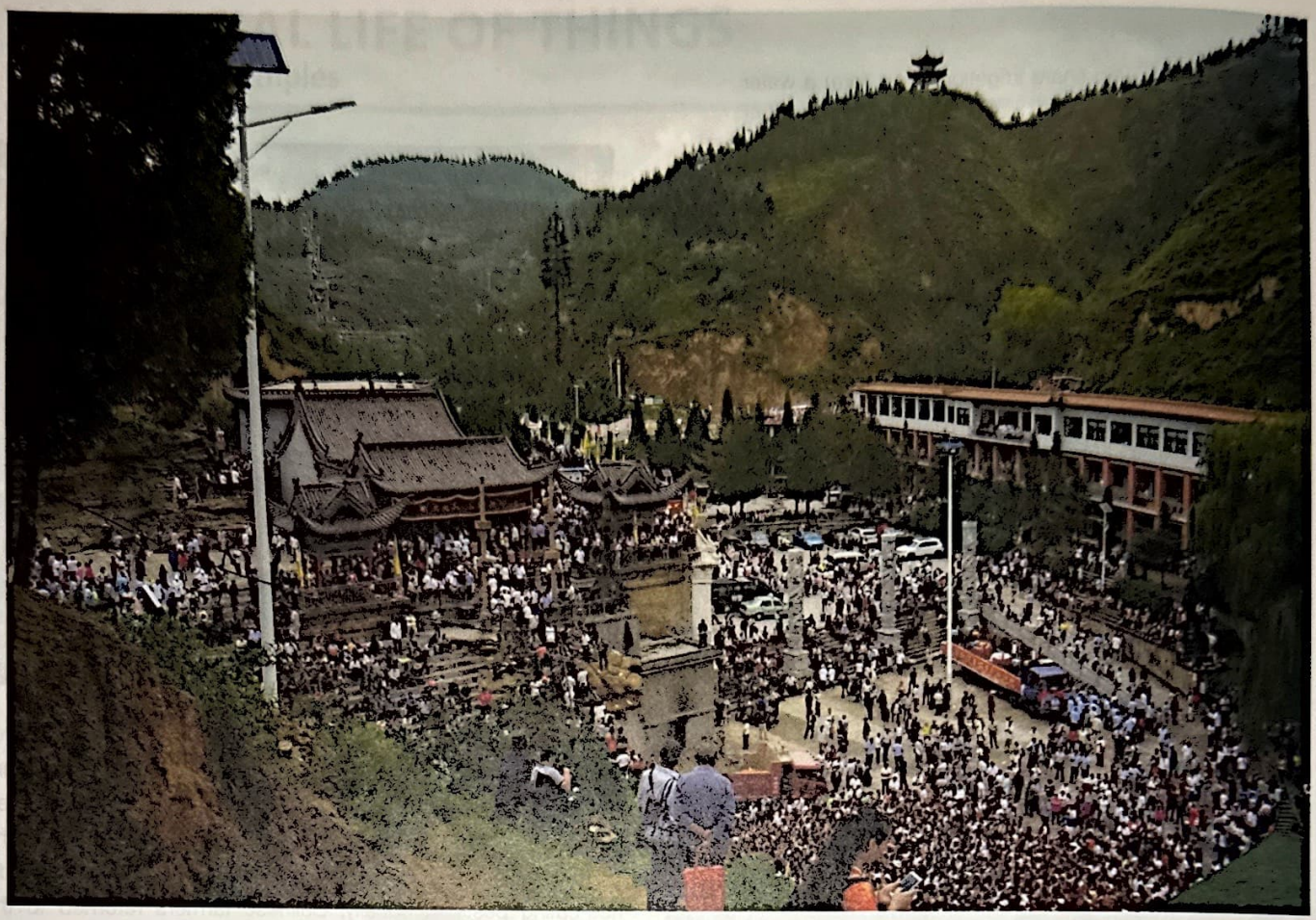
1 At the beginning of the growing season, farmers fill terraced rice paddies in the hills and countryside with water. On this volcanic island, water flows swiftly down mountainsides through sharp, steep fissures. Over the centuries, the Balinese have built an elaborate system of tunnels and canals to control water flow for farming. Bali's water temples carefully coordinate the distribution of this water to ensure the best conditions for growth while minimizing the habitat for rice-eating pests.

2 Farmers who share irrigation water form a water temple to manage the canals and terraces. At monthly gatherings, they give thanks to the island's water goddess and other local gods who make the rice grow, and they decide how and when they will plant in the coming season. Delegates from over 200 water temples journey to Bali's volcanic crater lake to bring offerings to the water goddess. They return home with water blessings for their local communities.

3 In the 1970s, the World Bank introduced a "green revolution" program in Bali to increase agricultural production through Western farming techniques; high-yield, fast-growing plants; chemical fertilizers; and pesticides. After only a few years of bumper crops, the program collapsed in near chaos, unable to control the island's rice-eating pests. Gradually, Balinese farmers returned to the water temple system that had maintained an ecological balance between humans, land, water, and animals for centuries.

4 Balinese religious beliefs, drawing heavily on Hindu precepts, hold that everything is made by the Creator. Killing one thing disturbs all things. Attention to the whole ecological system is central to religious ritual and practice, a dynamic easily overlooked by economists, engineers, and development officials, who may disregard the intersection of religion and power in local community life in favor of technological advancement. Balinese water temples apply the practical and spiritual wisdom accumulated over centuries to the island's complex agricultural system.

- Why do you think it was so easy for economists, engineers, and development officials to overlook the important role of the Balinese water temples? What facets of Balinese life might they have missed?
- Why do you think the Balinese water temple system has survived when other systems combining religion and power have collapsed?



Crowds attend the Black Dragon King Temple annual festival in rural Shaanbei, China. How would anthropologists examine the intersection of religion with other systems of power in this scene?

association—particularly Lao Wang—has become the most influential nongovernmental organization in the area, a powerful civic organization operating completely outside the realm of the Chinese state.

The Black Dragon King Temple reveals the surprising power of popular religion in contemporary China. Rural religious communities are carving out spaces of civic activity apart from the operations of the Chinese government, reviving and re-creating rural traditions in the face of modernization and urbanization throughout China. They are reasserting and negotiating avenues of autonomy in what has been a highly centralized political system (Chau 2006; Guest 2003).

Religion and Revolution in Mexico Charlene Floyd's (1996) research on the role of the Catholic Church in a revolutionary movement in the Chiapas region of southern Mexico provides another example of how meaning and power are expressed in religion. In Chiapas, one of the poorest states in Mexico, most children do not finish primary school, and many homes have no running water. The people are poor, but the land is rich: It holds large reserves of oil and

natural gas, provides most of Mexico's hydroelectric power, and supports half of the country's coffee crop. The tension between an impoverished people, on the one hand, and rich natural resources extracted by Mexico's state and corporations, on the other, has not always found a smooth resolution.

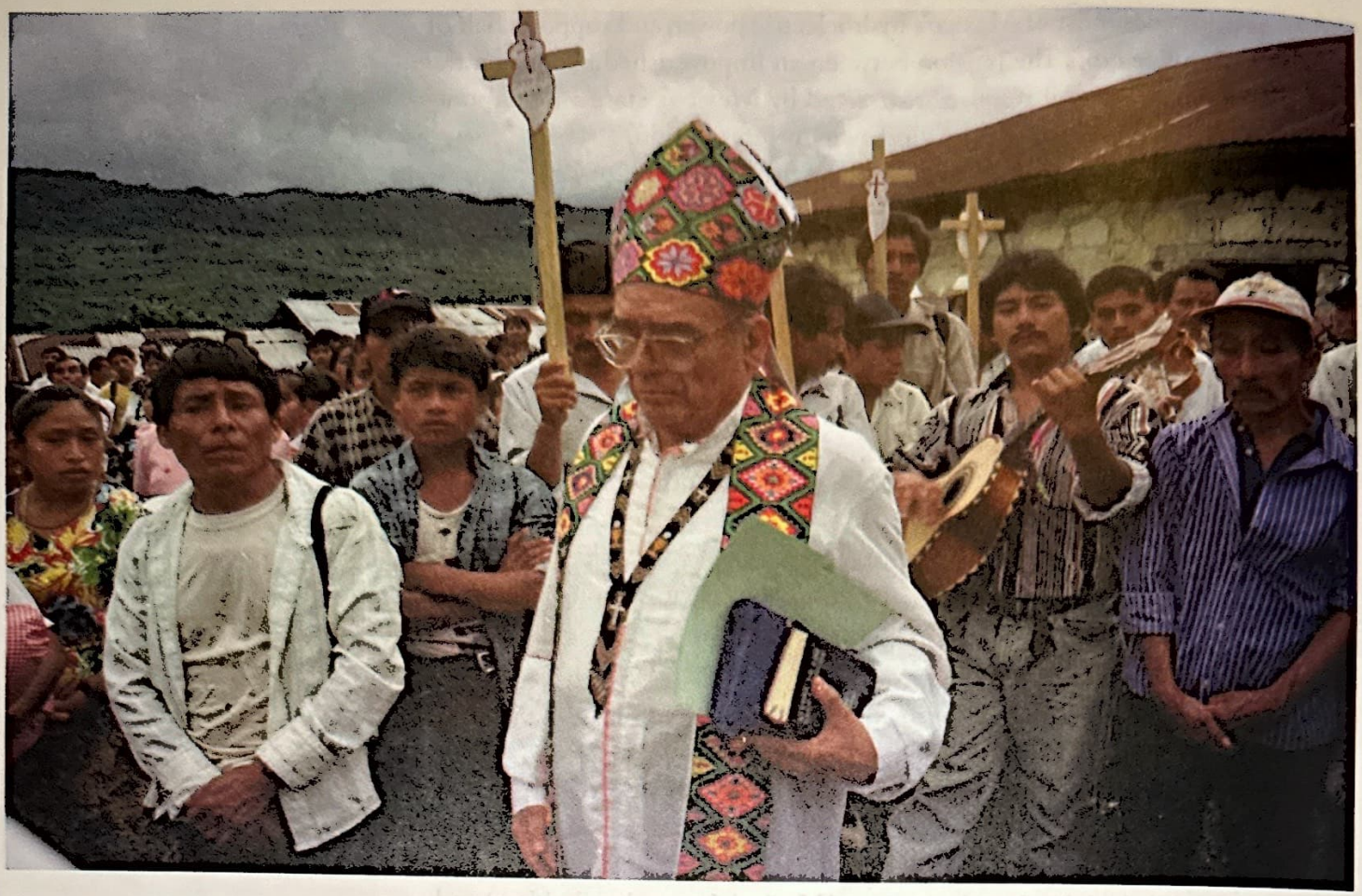
In the early hours of January 1, 1994, some of the poor people of Chiapas, calling themselves "Zapatistas" (after the Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata), covered their faces with bandanas and ski masks, marched into four Chiapas cities, and declared in a dramatic manifesto, "Today we say enough is enough!" Stunned by the uprising, the Mexican government and the economic leaders of Chiapas quickly accused the Catholic Church of inciting the rebellion. In particular, they blamed one of the bishops of Chiapas, Samuel Ruiz García, and his *catequistas*, or lay teachers. But how could a Catholic bishop and a group of lay teachers be accused of inciting a rebellion? Did they actually do so? In considering these questions, we must explore the Church's role in Mexican society.

MAP 15.7
Chiapas region, Mexico

Today, 90 percent of Mexicans identify as Catholic, a faith that has been a key component of Mexican national identity ever since Spanish colonizers forcibly imported it 500 years ago. In certain periods of Mexican history, religion and politics have been closely aligned. For example, a Catholic priest, Father Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, is credited with providing the initial spark for the Mexican independence movement in 1810. Calling on the name of Mexico's Indigenous saint, the Virgin of Guadalupe, Father Hidalgo challenged his parishioners by asking, "Will you free yourselves?" Despite periods of alignment, Mexican history has also seen ongoing tensions between the powerful institution of the Catholic Church (which has long been one of Mexico's largest landholders) and the Mexican state. The Church has been involved in Mexican political movements before, but did it have a role in the 1994 uprising in Chiapas? A quick look at recent Church history may shed light on this question.

In 1959, Pope John XXIII called for a Vatican Council to modernize the Catholic Church. By the end of this conference (1962–65), commonly called Vatican II, the Catholic Church had begun a dramatic revolution in theology and practice. In an attempt to redefine the Church as "the people of God" rather than an institution, Vatican II moved to make local congregations more accessible to laypeople. It permitted congregations to worship in their own local language rather than in Latin, and it encouraged priests and lay members to open the Church as a servant to the poor rather than an ally of the politically powerful.

Bishop Ruiz, head of the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas in Chiapas, attended Vatican II and a subsequent meeting in 1968 of Latin American Catholic leaders. He returned to Mexico determined to implement the Church's new theology of liberation: He would put the Church to work to better the life conditions of the 1 million primarily Indigenous people in his diocese. The diocesan program for training lay teachers (*catequistas*) transformed its curriculum from a



Catholic bishop Samuel Ruiz García of San Cristóbal in Chiapas, southern Mexico, and the Church's network of *catequistas* were accused by the Mexican government of inciting rebellion.

primary focus on Church doctrine, scriptures, law, liturgy, and music to include concerns of community life and social needs. By the time of the Zapatista uprising, the *catequistas* had grown from 700 to 8,000. Most were now elected by their local Indigenous communities, and they were deeply involved not only in traditional Catholic religious education but also in the empowerment of Indigenous people in their struggles against poverty. *Catequistas* developed prominent roles as community and political leaders, accompanying their constituents in efforts to eradicate poverty and landlessness in Chiapas and to open the state's political processes to greater participation from people at the grassroots.

Were Bishop Ruiz and the *catequistas* responsible for the 1994 Zapatista uprising? No accusations of their direct role in the uprising's leadership have been proven. But did the theology of liberation—which expressed the Catholic Church's desire for the empowerment of Indigenous people and the elimination of poverty—provide moral support and practical training to communities engaged in this struggle? If so, then the Catholic Church of Chiapas provides an instructive example for anthropologists of how we must consider the ways religious ideas and symbols engage with other systems of power to understand religion in all its fullness (Floyd 1996).

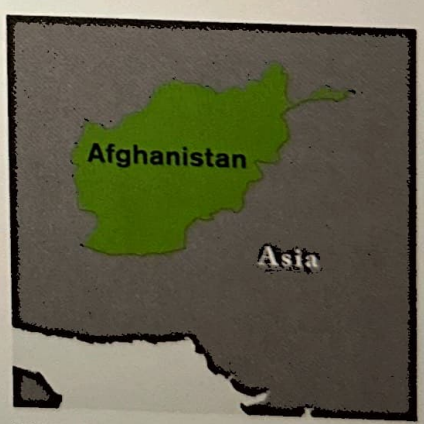
Afghan security officials inspect the site of a suicide car bomb in the capital city, Kabul, 2018.

***Caravan of Martyrs*: Religion, Politics, and Suicide Bombing** In his book *Caravan of Martyrs: Sacrifice and Suicide Bombing in Afghanistan* (2017), anthropologist David B. Edwards, who has been studying Afghanistan for over forty years, explores complicated historical, cultural, and religious frameworks for thinking about suicide bombing. How is it that "men (and sometimes even women and children) would come to consider it a good thing to strap bombs onto their bodies, walk into crowded places, and trigger the bombs, knowing that they will lose their own lives and that they will take with them a large number of strangers" (Edwards 2017, 15)?

Edwards's fascination with Afghanistan began in the 1960s when his grandmother sent him a postcard of a camel caravan during her travels through the country. But since his first visit in 1978, Afghanistan has experienced unimaginable violence spurred by foreign occupations (Soviet Union, 1981–91; United States, 2001–21) and internal battles between Al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, and the Taliban in which Afghanistan and its people became proxies in broader global affairs.

The United States invaded Afghanistan after the September 11, 2001, suicide bombing airplane attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. In response to U.S. occupation, bin Laden named suicide bombing an explicit strategy of "martyrdom operations against the enemy" (Edwards 2017, 14). As a result, bombing episodes in Afghanistan increased dramatically—rising from only two in 2003 to an average of one hundred a year toward the end of U.S. occupation in 2021.

Edwards asks the reader to consider suicide bombing in the context of the Afghan and Muslim notions of sacrifice and martyrdom. Sacrifice, closely tied



MAP 15.8
Afghanistan

to key cultural values of loyalty to family and the maintenance of honor, has always been a part of local customs and traditions in the region. But in the context of U.S. invasion, loyalty gradually shifted from kinship ties to Islamic political parties. As a result, just as Afghan tribesmen traditionally were obligated to defend their families and their land, they became obligated to defend Islam and the Afghan homeland. When that was not possible, revenge was often the next step—including revenge through self-sacrifice and martyrdom.

Suicide, suggests Edwards, is a form of ritual sacrifice. Such rituals require that one give something up to attain one's goal, whether religious or political. In Afghanistan, the ritual of suicide bombing came to include the sacrifice of oneself and others. This sacrifice must be witnessed by one's community so that the ritual is not individualized but understood as part of a collective action. Following Durkheim's work on ritual and religion, discussed earlier in this chapter, this collective action releases new energy into the group, transforming the profane into the sacred through the act of sacrifice and martyrdom. In Afghanistan, the ritual is more than just symbolic action: It has become a means of carrying out political struggle.

Edwards documents the many ways in which the U.S. invasion and occupation brought a degrading loss of honor to Afghan people. Drone strikes, night raids, household searches, armored convoys traversing Afghan terrain, the mixing of men and women, an ignorance of Afghan honor codes—all were degrading in their different forms. Drone warfare—launched at a distance by unseen and unassailable antagonists against defenseless individuals, families, and groups—was experienced as the most insidious humiliation to those honor bound to protect family and land. What could be an appropriate response in such asymmetrical warfare? It is in this context, Edwards argues, that suicide bombings came to be seen as the only way to recover one's honor in the community. Martyrdom, specifically the political act of striking an unjust oppressor, became the only way to fulfill the expectations of Islam.

Over the last twenty years of the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan, warfare radicalized the practice of martyrdom and martyrdom radicalized the practice of warfare. Radical sacrifice, of one's own life and that of others, changed the battlefield and the terms of battle. Ritualized death, while lamented, came to be actively sought out, even desirable. Suicide bombings became entrenched in everyday life. The perpetrators formed a caravan of people on a journey connected by a common purpose, but not a caravan of trade or commerce—a caravan of martyrs (Allison 2019; Malkasian 2017).

Think back to the discussions of religious expression in China and Mexico as well as your own experiences with religious communities. In what ways do those different religious contexts exemplify the blurring of boundaries between meaning and power?

How Is Globalization Changing Religion?

» Explain how globalization is changing religion.

The forces of globalization—especially migration and time-space compression—are stretching and shaping religions and religious practices. Increasing immigration sometimes means that whole communities—their beliefs, religious architecture, religious leaders, and even their gods—relocate across national boundaries. Travel is broadening the encounters of people of different faiths. At the same time, information about religion is more widely available, and communication technologies enable religious institutions to transform their strategies for cultivating and educating participants. Cities, especially those serving as immigrant gateways, are generally the focal point of these encounters. It is here that new immigrants revitalize older religious institutions and construct new ones, often establishing deep ties to home and sophisticated networks of transnational exchange in the process.

Revitalizing the Catholic Church in the United States

Throughout the United States, Catholic churches are being rejuvenated by immigration from heavily Catholic countries. A 2005 wave of rallies across major U.S. cities in support of immigration reform received key institutional and organizational support from local Catholic churches and encouragement from U.S. Catholic leadership. Indeed, the Church saw reuniting families across the border and protecting vulnerable, low-wage workers as key human rights issues. At the same time, today's immigrants are reshaping the Church's future—just as immigrant waves from Ireland, Germany, and Italy did in the nineteenth century—with new members, worship styles, social needs, and political engagements.

Mexican Catholicism in New York City Mexican immigrants have reshaped many of New York City's Catholic churches over the past twenty years. As hundreds of thousands of Mexicans, many undocumented and the vast majority Catholic, have come to the city to work in low-wage jobs in restaurants, grocery stores, construction, and the nearby agricultural industry on Long Island, they have brought their home-country religious practices with them. Particularly notable is their devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe—the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus, as she miraculously appeared in the form of an Indigenous woman on the Hill of Tepeyac (in what is now Mexico City) in 1531. The Virgin of Guadalupe has since become a symbol of the Mexican nation and of the special blessings Mexicans have received from God.

Dena Freeman

Religion and Development in an Ethiopian Village

Anthropologist Dena Freeman of the London School of Economics has spent over twenty years studying the cultural transformation of villages in the Gamo Highlands of southern Ethiopia. Her early research, which she wrote about in her first book, *Initiating Change in Highland Ethiopia* (2002), focused on the dynamics of political and ritual transformation, while her more recent work has explored the intersection of local religious practices and economic development efforts.

"When I first did fieldwork in the mid-1990s, I lived out in a little village in a mud hut in the middle of nowhere, in a community that was really peripheral to capitalism. People were subsistence farmers. They had very little money. They would buy a bit of salt or a bit of sugar in the market. Occasionally they would sell a cow. But the main locus of their economy was non-capitalist." Religion, economics, politics, and kinship were all deeply intertwined in the village.

Anthropologist Dena Freeman

Six years later, Freeman returned to the village and was surprised by the rapid religious and economic changes, which she later wrote about in her book *Pentecostalism and Development* (2012). The number of Pentecostal Christians had grown from around 10 percent to nearly 70 percent of the population. And the majority of people were now engaged in growing apples as a cash crop. What had happened? And was there a connection between these two phenomena?

During her time away, a development nongovernmental organization (NGO) had chosen her highland village for a project growing apples. "Normally peasant societies are very resistant to change and new technologies. So why did so many people jump at this? Then I noticed that in my little neighborhood of the village alone, six out of seven of the farmers who had first experimented with apples were Pentecostals. In the village's traditional religion, relationships with the spirits are mediated by one's father, the lineage head, and the clan head through various ritual sacrifices and thus people are placed in a social hierarchy.

"In contrast, the Pentecostal message is rather liberating and somewhat revolutionary, especially to young men who were at the bottom of the traditional hierarchy. Pentecostalism encourages you to be independent, not dependent on your father or your elders like in the traditional system. And it calls the traditional religious practices devil worship. So these predominately young Pentecostal men—many of them educated by the churches—were desperately looking for ways to be independent from their fathers, who owned all the land and all the means of production. They were really ready for this apple project when it came and they jumped at the chance to get involved."

The early success of the first apple growers began to destabilize other community practices. "In the traditional

system, when you start generating some wealth, the elders come to you and tell you it's time to become initiated, to become *halak'a*. The initiation involves elaborate rituals and sponsoring huge feasts for everyone in the community.

"I actually think that the vast majority of traditional religious-economic type systems are essentially systems for redistributing wealth. The people who have more wealth basically trade their wealth for status in the community. And this keeps things in a kind of balance.

"Now with the Pentecostals, who were only a tiny minority of 10 percent, they had already said that this is all devil worship and that they didn't want anything to do with it. So when the elders came to make them *halak'a*, they said no. And they kept their wealth.

> *"I think that's the magic of anthropology, the possibility of alternatives."*

"A year or two later when the next batch of farmers was chosen by the NGO, more people were interested, even ones who were not Pentecostal, because they had seen the success of the apple trade. When they made some money as well, the elders came to ask them to become *halak'a*. The only way that they could legitimately, and morally, say no was if they were Pentecostal and thus outside of the traditional system. It appears that an awful lot of people converted to Pentecostalism at that time.

"Once they started learning things in the church and becoming involved, for the vast majority of them it turned into something much deeper and much more meaningful. But the apples were the initial push."

Drawing on Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, about the role of Protestant ethical and moral ideas in the rise of Western capitalism, Freeman developed a notion she calls a Pentecostal ethic and the spirit of development.

"In the general dynamic of moving from a redistributive cultural system to something that morally allowed accumulation, I think the religion part is really important. A lot of development projects focus solely on the material things. Will it teach people new skills? Will it teach them new techniques? What they miss is the change in morality and values that I think Pentecostalism brings that is a very powerful mechanism for reformulating people's relationships with their community and family. Its ethical ideas make successful enterprise and individual accumulation seem moral, not simply selfish.

"In the pre-apple era, the traditional cultural system had various ways of keeping people happy. It was very communal. They worked hard, but it was with their friends and family, at a fairly relaxed pace. Work was interspersed with coffee drinking and joking with your neighbors. Once people started getting into the apples, time became money. People drink coffee less because it takes up so much time. They still joke around, but they do it much less. The greetings are less. There are more conflicts. People now have things that they're worried will be stolen. Then people start building fences and having guard dogs.

"And what did they get in return? Everyone now wears shoes. More kids go to school. There are more plastic buckets. People have more changes of clothes. But are they happier in the long run?" Freeman remains a skeptic.

Freeman traces her interest in anthropology to a backpacking trip through Africa during college. "That really opened my eyes to the world—to different ways of living in the world and being in the world. I also began to see other people's cosmologies: other people's ideas of how the world was, how it worked, and what our places in it are. I began to imagine the possibility of alternatives, the possibility that the world I always knew and grew up in was not the only way the world was. That was very exciting intellectually and also very liberating for me. I still think that's the magic of anthropology, the possibility of alternatives."

YOUR TURN: FIELDWORK

Visit to a Religious Community

Choose a religious community that you would like to visit, either by yourself or with other members of your class. Contact the organization to arrange a visit at a time when you can participate in a public ritual, perhaps a worship service, festival, or parade. Be sure to find out what attire is appropriate for visitors.

During your visit, consider how the concepts introduced in this chapter can serve as tools for analyzing and understanding what you see.

1. Do you see examples of sacred and profane objects/acts during your visit (Durkheim)?
2. Can you recognize ways in which ritual promotes a sense of communitas by leading members through separation, liminality, and reincorporation (Turner)?
3. Is Marx's critique of religion as "the opiate of the masses" relevant to the event you attend?
4. Can you identify particular symbols (Geertz) unique to this religious community and determine their meaning? What do you think gives them their power and authority (Asad)?
5. How does power make itself evident during your visit? What power relationships do you observe?
6. Can you identify any ways in which globalization influences the religious beliefs and practices that you observe?

If appropriate, interview a religious leader and/or a member of the religious community during your visit. Use the interview to explore these questions further and to gain deeper insight into what you observe.

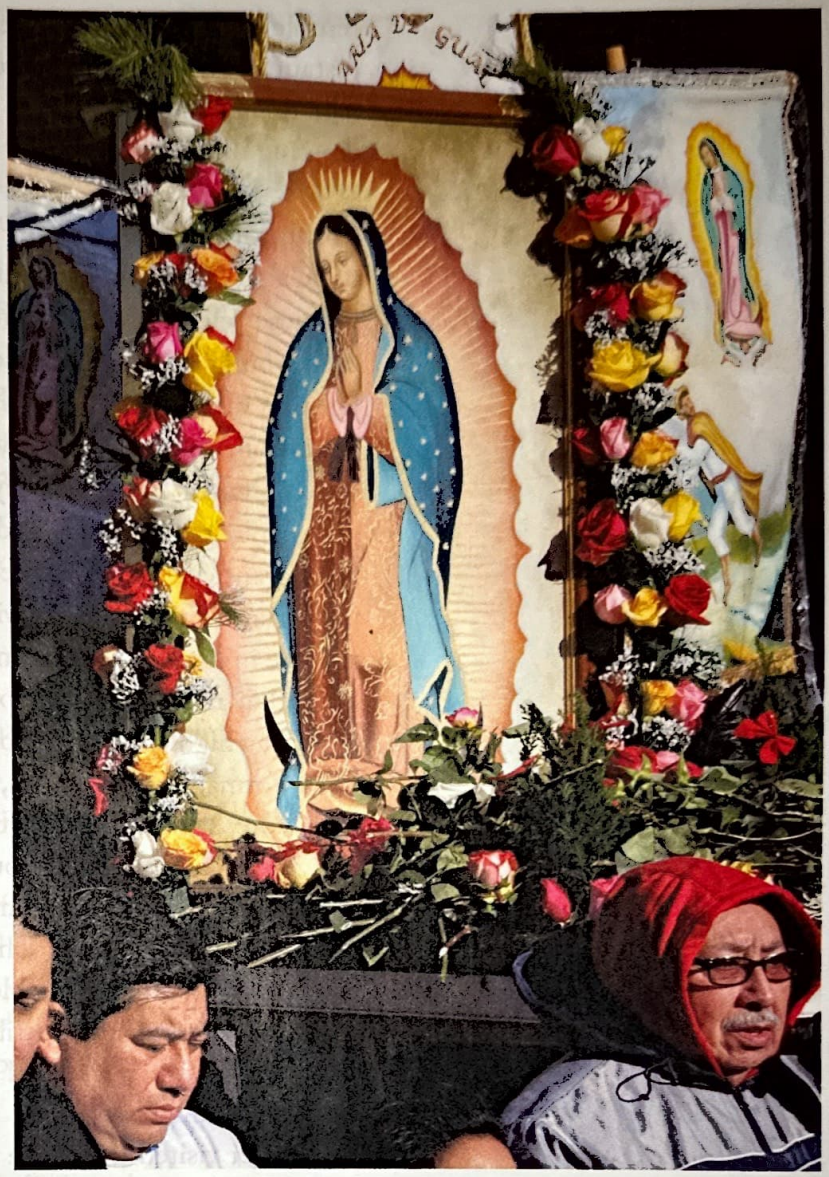
If you attend with other classmates, compare your reflections after the visit. Be sure to reread the relevant sections of this chapter to see which concepts come alive in more detail now that you have observed the activities of a religious community from an anthropological viewpoint.

Catholic churches across the city prominently display images of the Virgin. Within parishes, Guadalupano committees have formed to meet new members' needs and political concerns. The root of these committees is Association Tepeyac, an organization created in New York by a Mexican Catholic religious order to advocate for immigrant rights, services, and legalization. Tepeyac draws on the symbolic power of the Virgin to galvanize its movement. In this context, devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe links and mobilizes Mexicans more than language, ethnicity, social class, or common nationality. She is a symbol not only of Mexican national identity but also of a universal Catholic commitment to human rights, venerated as a protector of the poor, oppressed, and weak. Tepeyac supports and links Guadalupano committees in local churches and takes the lead in advocating for immigrant rights, particularly for general amnesty for undocumented workers.

The arrival of Mexican Catholics has brought increased attention to the plight of undocumented workers and has built new symbolic and practical links

across the U.S.–Mexico border. On December 12, each year since 2002, thousands of Mexican Catholics have walked in procession down New York City's Fifth Avenue to St. Patrick's Cathedral to celebrate the Feast Day of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Organized by Association Tepeyac and the Guadalupano committees, the procession in New York is the culmination of a torch run that begins at the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City. Each year, Mexican Catholic devotees carry a lit torch and a portrait of the Virgin across the U.S.–Mexico border and through the large Mexican immigrant populations across the southeastern United States (including in Alabama, Georgia, and North Carolina), culminating their pilgrimage in New York. Calling themselves "messengers of a people divided by a border," the torch runners combine an expression of religious devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe with advocacy for the reform of U.S. immigration laws.

Through their devotional practices, Tepeyac and the Guadalupano committees articulate an alternative citizenship. This citizenship is not subject to the temporary and seemingly capricious laws of a single country. Rather, it is one in which all people are equal in the eyes of the Mother of God, represented in her manifestation as the Virgin of Guadalupe. Today, as globalization stimulates the international movement of people, nation-states may resist that movement through immigration policies that create disjunctions for family members living on opposite sides of a border or for undocumented immigrants living on the wrong side of the law. For these immigrants, as revealed in the story of Tepeyac and the Guadalupano committees, religion can provide both a symbolic and material healing of the rifts created by states' responses to globalization and cross-border flows of immigrants (Galvez 2009).



How are religious practices crossing national borders in our global age? Every year, Mexican Catholics carry a lit torch and a portrait of Our Lady of Guadalupe from Mexico City to New York, combining religious expression with political advocacy for reform of U.S. immigration laws.

Relocating Rituals and Deities from the Home Country

Globalization is transforming the ritual practices of religious communities large and small as congregations adapt to their members' mobility and the lively flow of ideas, information, and money across borders. These dynamics have rapidly spread the religious practices of a small, local Daoist village

temple in rural China to New York and beyond through a network of Chinese restaurants across the United States. Today, thanks to globalization, the village temple's adherents and their local god have become international border-crossing immigrants.

Immigrant Chinese Gods A few years ago, I walked into a little temple just off Canal Street in Manhattan's Chinatown as part of a project to map the Chinese religious communities in New York City (Guest 2003). Women and men, young and old, crowded into the noisy and smoky old storefront space, lighting incense, chatting with old friends, and saying prayers at the altar. Most were from the same small village in southeastern China, outside the provincial capital of Fuzhou. They had opened this temple to continue their religious practices in the United States and to serve as a gathering place for fellow immigrant villagers who lived and worked in and around New York City. Here, immigrants can reconnect with friends and relatives from their hometown, participate in rituals of devotion to their deities, and build networks of fellow devotees they may not have known before arriving in New York.

For a highly transient population, the temple serves as a center for exchanging information about jobs, housing, lawyers, doctors, employment agencies, and more. It operates a revolving loan fund to help members pay off smuggling debts or start up takeout restaurants. Through the temple, members contribute to building their home temple and support other charitable projects in their community back in China. Despite the undocumented status of many of these immigrants, the temple allows them to participate in civic activities and express themselves as contributing members of the community—in much the same way that Tepeyac and the Guadalupano committees do for New York's Mexican immigrants.

I later visited the home village temple in China to learn about village life and local religious traditions. One evening as I prepared to leave, the master of the temple expressed disappointment that I had not been able to meet the temple's spirit medium, a young woman who had a special relationship with the village's local god. He explained that on the first and fifteenth day of each lunar month, the local god possesses her and speaks through her to interpret the villagers' dreams and answer their questions: What name should I give my child? What herbal remedy will cure my ill? Will this woman be a good match for my son? When should I try to be smuggled out of China to the United States? I shared the master's disappointment at this missed opportunity and readily accepted his invitation to return on a future visit.

A year later I did return. The spirit medium, however, was gone. She and her husband, the temple master informed me, had moved to the United States and were now working in a restaurant in a place called "Indiana." I was disappointed

again, but I expressed my concern that their departure may have disrupted a key element of temple life. The master then told me this story:

> Actually she still does it—only now it's from Indiana. Our believers work in restaurants all over the United States and some are still here in China. When they want to ask the advice of the god, they just pick up their cell phones and call. The spirit medium keeps careful records of their questions and dreams. Then on the first and fifteenth of the lunar month, just as always used to happen when she was here, she goes into a trance. The god leaves our temple here in China and flies to Indiana to possess her. Her husband then asks all the questions and writes down the answers. When the possession is over, the god returns to our village, and the spirit medium and her husband return all the phone calls to report the wisdom of the god.

Perhaps the look on my face and my one raised eyebrow alerted the master to my initial skepticism. "We can feel the god leave here every time," he said. "Really. Why don't you believe that? In America you have lots of Christians who believe the Christian god can be everywhere in the world at the same time. Why can't ours?"

The more I thought about it, the more I wondered why the local god of a village in China couldn't also be in Indiana. As an anthropologist of religion, I was reminded once again that religious practices and beliefs in today's age of globalization continue to be fluid and adaptable. After all, humans are adaptable, and so are their cultural constructions. Religion is a vibrant example of this core anthropological insight.

Anthropology challenges us to understand the beliefs and practices of others from within their own cultural framework. By making the strange familiar, we may then also make the familiar strange. In other words, we may take what seems natural and normal in our own lives and see it through new eyes.

The study of religion often forces anthropologists to address personal issues of identity, belief, and objectivity in ways that many other areas of study do not. Is it possible to fully understand a religion without being a practitioner? Can researchers remain objective if they practice the religion they study? Anthropologists of religion consider these important questions when conducting fieldwork and writing about their experiences. Through any experience of intensive fieldwork, we risk challenging, transforming, and possibly shattering our own worldviews even as we risk influencing those of the people we study. These dynamics are particularly volatile in the study of religion.

Thinking Like an Anthropologist: Religion in the Twenty-First Century

After reading this chapter, you should have a deeper understanding of some of the approaches anthropologists take to understanding the role of religion in people's lives and in communities large and small. These insights can serve as a toolkit as you consider expressions of religion in other countries and at home in the United States.

Think again about the story of Reverend William Barber II and the Poor People's Campaign (PPC) that opened the chapter, and recall the key questions we have asked about religion:

- What is religion?
- What tools do anthropologists use to understand how religion works?
- In what ways is religion both a system of meaning and a system of power?
- How is globalization changing religion?

After reading the chapter, can you apply the writings of Durkheim, Marx, Weber, Geertz, and Asad to events in the real world? Can you see the concepts of sacred and profane, ritual, rite of passage, communitas, symbol, and power emerge in religious expressions in your own life?

Barber and the PPC have decided to use their symbolic and material power to challenge what they consider unjust policies of the state. Of particular concern are the 140 million poor and low-wealth people in the United States. Over the past five years, the PPC has worked to build a grassroots coalition that includes these people along with religious leaders, community organizers, union workers, anti-poverty activists, and interested leaders from other intersecting social movements. One of the campaign's innovations has been the creation of a Moral Budget in collaboration with leading Washington, D.C., economic think tanks like the Institute for Policy Studies and the Economic Policy Institute. The Moral Budget attempts to provide an alternative to the U.S. government's budget, replacing it instead with a financial blueprint that reflects the religious and social values embodied by the PPC. In speaking about the U.S. budget, Barber often says that a country that can spend $850 billion dollars each year on the military can find money to make sure people have enough to eat, a place to sleep, and a job that pays a living wage. Poverty is not a result of scarcity. It is a policy choice.

The PPC seeks to address not only poverty but also what it calls other "interlocking evils": systemic racism, ecological devastation, the war economy, and the distorted moral narrative often associated with Christian nationalism. Consider how the work of Barber and the PPC reveals religion to be a system of both meaning and power. As you think about religion in your own life and in your community, nation, and world, how can your anthropological toolkit help you better understand both the personal and public role of religion?

Key Terms

religion (p. 571)
martyr (p. 573)
saint (p. 573)
sacred (p. 576)

profane (p. 576)
ritual (p. 576)
rite of passage (p. 577)
liminality (p. 578)
communitas (p. 578)
pilgrimage (p. 579)
cultural materialism (p. 582)
secular (p. 584)
shamans (p. 585)
magic (p. 586)
symbol (p. 591)
authorizing process (p. 593)

For Further Exploration

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The Pluralism Project. Harvard University. www.pluralism.org. Thirty-year-long Harvard University project to document the changing U.S. religious landscape. Of particular interest, case studies explore critical incidents of religious interaction in a contemporary U.S. context.

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